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Critical Learning in the Transition from Professional Specialist to Senior Executive

A project submitted to Middlesex University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Professional Studies

Richard E. Durrant

Institute for Work Based Learning Middlesex University
in collaboration with
the Professional Development Foundation

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Critical Learning in the Transition from Professional Specialist to Senior Executive

Abstract

Many organisations depend heavily on having professional employees become capable leaders, but very little research has been done to ask leaders themselves about the learning involved in this very significant change of roles. In this study, a group of senior executives in large public and private sector organisations identified the most important leadership related insights and skills they had acquired as they made the transition from professional specialist to senior leader. Six male and six female executives each participated in approximately three hours of in-depth interviewing during which they shared narratives describing the events and experiences that had led to these key areas of learning.

Participants began their careers in fields as diverse as police service, engineering, corporate law, nursing, economics and teaching, and they worked in organisations ranging from hospitals, to universities, to government agencies, to a variety of large corporations. Even with this notable diversity, and with the freedom to speak without prompting, there was substantial common ground in the insights and skills they determined to be most important to their performance as leaders, and there were shared patterns in the types of learning experiences they described. At the same time, these executives were distinctly different individuals with unique backgrounds, and it was notable that they had each made sense of leadership in their own personal way. Their career stories also revealed that becoming a senior leader involved three types of profound personal change. Implications and recommendations for further research and for leadership development are discussed.

Critical Learning in the Transition from Professional Specialist to Senior Executive

Chapter I: Introduction

This study explores how a group of highly accomplished senior executives described the career long learning that prepared them to be leaders in large private and public sector organisations. All of the participating executives transitioned into management after establishing themselves as capable professionals. Their leadership related learning began early as they experienced part-time and summer jobs while they were students, and continued through initial professional positions, first supervisory roles, and all of the levels of responsibility that led to the executive office. They worked in engineering, law, economics, teaching, nursing, social work, information technology and policing. Through in-depth interviewing based on narrative inquiry, the study examined a) what these executives identified as the most important things they had learned about leadership, and b) the types of events and experiences that led to this learning. The findings revealed both shared patterns of learning across vastly different professions and types of organisations, and unique pathways that individuals followed to grow as leaders. It also became clear that these executives saw learning to be a leader as a process that encompassed the acquisition of concrete skills, the discovery of important insights, and the challenge of profound personal change.

The Starting Point

The initial idea for this study arose from a series of personal observations that came through working as an executive coach.

1. The first observation was that the task of providing leadership in large organisations is complex and difficult. Executive level managers working with executive coaches routinely discuss challenges that involve business or service strategy, organisational change, project management, personnel management, interpersonal issues and an array of issues related to the

pressures of the job. The continuum of learning that prepares someone for a senior executive role stretches from learning to manage a complex enterprise in an ever-changing world to learning to manage one's own life.

2. The second observation was that these leaders have a lot of knowledge and experience to share. These are intelligent and capable people, and while some of them seek the support of executive coaches to become even better in their roles, the coach is just as likely to learn from the executive.
3. The third observation was that much of the learning these executives have accumulated during their careers is not available to junior and mid level managers. If you ask developing managers about the issues their executive teams face on a daily basis, and the specific abilities that are needed to succeed at the executive level, they often have very little insight. This is perhaps not surprising because these managers are focused on the challenges at their levels. However, it means that they do not have a good understanding of what they need to learn if they wish to go higher in the organisation. The inner workings of the executive offices are effectively hidden from these people, unless they are fortunate enough to regularly come into contact with their executive group or to have an executive mentor. Similarly, the people responsible for leadership development in large organisations are often detached from the day-to-day realities facing their organisation's executive team. Consequently, even though they have responsibility for organizing such things as leadership training programmes, they have little opportunity to observe the approaches, thought processes and procedures that senior leaders bring to their jobs.
4. The fourth observation was that many of today's organisations rely heavily on turning professionals into managers and executives, but these same professionals can find the transition into management to be very difficult. For example, it is not unusual for a developing manager to get overwhelmed as they continue to rely on their personal ability to do the professional work, rather than to become skilled at getting work done

through others. After all, the fact that they stood out as having exceptional skill as a nurse, engineer, or economist is likely to be one of the reasons that they were given a more senior job. Other problems can arise when the professional abilities a person has honed do not include the communication and interpersonal skills they need to succeed as leaders of large numbers of people, or when very individual skills in areas like stress management are lacking.

5. And the final observation was a practical one. While other researchers may have trouble accessing the schedules of extremely busy top leaders, an executive coach has access to a network of these individuals. From the perspective of planning and executing a manageable study, this was a distinct advantage.

The Research Problem and the Potential Benefits

The literature review in the following chapter reveals two significant gaps in the available research. First, while a number of approaches have been taken to answering the question “What do leaders need to learn?”, there have been very few research projects that consult established leaders, and give them the opportunity to discuss with depth and detail the learning that led to their success. And second, the small amount of this type of research that is available does not specifically explore the transition from professional to manager to senior executive. The research problem was to analyze the leadership related learning of a group of professionals who had become senior executives to identify and describe a) the career learning experiences, and b) the acquired insights and skills that they considered to be most important in their leadership development.

The challenge was to devise a research process that would allow the voices of a group of “professionals turned leaders” to be fully heard, and shared in a way that would benefit developing leaders and the leadership development field. There appeared to be a great deal of value in allowing professionals and developing managers to effectively see inside the experiences and the learning of a group of successful leaders who had already taken the path they might want to follow.

Studying the narratives of these leaders helped fill a gap in the research literature, and contributed to taking the evolution of senior leadership ability from private and hidden to open and observable. In addition to being useful to employees wanting to develop their leadership capability, this work is of interest to other leadership/executive coaches, leadership specialists and trainers, and the organisations needing to see strong leaders come out of the ranks of their professional employees.

The fact that many of these leaders shared common experiences and areas of learning leads to important questions about whether broader samples of leaders would also share this common ground, and if so, what it would imply for career planning and leadership development programmes. It is also interesting to compare the models of leadership that dominate the literature to the views of these real world leaders. And, given the distinct differences displayed by some of these leaders, there is a need to carefully consider how leadership development can benefit from being customized to leaders with unique personalities, strengths and perspectives.

Chapter II: Terms of Reference and Literature Review

Context: The Importance of Helping Professionals Become Capable Leaders

The senior leaders of many organisations were originally educated and hired as professionals such as engineers, lawyers, accountants, nurses, or police officers. Major institutions such as public education systems, universities and hospitals, and business sectors including financial, engineering and technical firms look to their professional ranks to find the leaders who will run their organisations. The key observation is that early in their careers these people prove themselves to be highly competent as specialists, and then they make a major transition into a new phase when they gain competence as leaders. They move into management, and eventually senior management, and along the way they become able to contribute to their organisation at a broader, more strategic level, and they gain increasing responsibility as leaders of people. The organisations that employ these emerging leaders, and the executive coaches, leadership development specialist, and trainers who attempt to support them, have a strong vested interest in helping these key employees make this transition successfully. Successfully navigating this path of ever increasing responsibility is vital to the individual's happiness and the organisation's achievement. This is especially true if the former specialist reaches the senior executive level (e.g. CEO, CFO, Executive Vice President), and has leadership responsibilities with far reaching consequences. It has been argued, that in business, leadership is so important that strong leaders give a company a key competitive advantage (Pfeffer, 1995), and set outstanding companies apart from those with less impressive records (Bennett, Dunn and Harriman, 1999).

In some professions, there are calls for greater efforts to develop strong leaders. Farr and Brazil (2009) address the need for leaders in the field of engineering to develop business acumen and the ability to lead teams, and assert that it is essential to succeeding in a global business environment. Similarly, Nettesheim (2007) voices the view that leadership development programmes at technical firms are not building adequate leadership capacity, and are particularly deficient when it comes to effectively managing people. Other professions already have a major focus on leadership development with graduate programmes, journals and conferences addressing leadership in professions such as nursing and education.

The need for professionals to develop leadership ability is reflected in the fact that the UK's National Health Service runs a Leadership Academy and a Top Leaders programme designed to build managerial skills (Lynas, 2012), and that the medical field has a substantial body of research examining how the quality of leadership provided by nurses and doctors impacts critical issues such as staff retention and the ability to introduce innovation (Cummings et al., 2008, Garduff et al., 2008, Milisen et al., 2006, Clement-O'Brien, Polit and Fitzpatrick, 2011).

The author's experiences as a leadership coach, and his discussions with coaching colleagues, suggest that when professionals become leaders they need to let go of many habits and assumptions that no longer serve them, and come to understand how their organisation needs them to function in progressively higher positions. This includes gaining a great deal of insight into the nature of effective leadership. They also need to gain the practical skills that leaders need to function, e.g. public speaking, chairing meetings, delegating effectively.

Purpose of the Project

The literature review that follows establishes that there have been many attempts to identify the attributes, insights and skills strong leaders need. However, it also shows that very few of these attempts have involved formal research asking senior leaders to examine their careers to identify the leadership insights and skill that they believe have served them well and allowed them to be successful. There is a particular lack of research giving leaders free rein to reflect in-depth on important leadership related learning unconfined by specific interview, questionnaire or survey questions. This lack of research exists for leaders in general, and for the leaders who are of particular interest to this project, i.e. leaders who began their careers as specialized professionals. In short, there is a major gap in our understanding of organisational leadership in that leaders themselves have rarely been given the opportunity to share their insights on critical leadership related learning.

The purpose of this study was to begin to fill that gap by conducting a deep and rich investigation of one group of professionals who became top executives, deliberately selected to cover both male and female leaders, a range of

professions, and a range of types of organisations. Working with quite long in-depth interviews, the intention was to see leadership growth through the eyes of this group of executives, and to come to understand how they viewed the most important things they had learned about leadership, and the events that led to that learning as they made the gradually transition from professional to executive.

It is important to acknowledge that many other writers have interviewed leaders in politics, business and sports from a more biographical or journalistic perspective to uncover motivating life stories, personal beliefs and “secrets of success”. This work is both entertaining and useful. Indeed, participants in this study commented on how their views on leadership had been influenced by the lives of prominent leaders. This project has three key differences. It brings a carefully considered research methodology to the task that draws out the themes in a consistent and rigorous way. It explores many aspects of leadership, including those that are mundane, without a “leader as hero” mentality. And, the content is shaped by what the participants determined to be important, and not by a predetermined wish to explore a type of story, leadership theme or theory.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The research began with three objectives.

1. To identify the acquired leadership insights and skills that the participating executives saw as central to their success as leaders.
2. To describe the learning events and experiences that developed these insights and skills, and factors such as important relationships (supervisors, mentors, peers, etc.), and formal education and training programmes that influenced the learning process.
3. To identify a) patterns in the leadership learning of participants and b) unique learning pathways revealing where there was important common ground and important differences within the sample.

Arising from these objectives, four main research questions were addressed.

1. What events and experiences do these successful executives credit with influencing their leadership related learning as they moved through the transition from professional specialist to senior leader?
2. What important leadership related insights and skills were gained from these important learning events and experiences?
3. What supporting elements (relationships, assignments, etc.) facilitated this learning?
4. What are the patterns of similarities and differences among participants in terms of their leadership learning events and experiences, and their acquired leadership insights and skills?

The Nature of the Research

The methodology of this study is described in detail in the next chapter. However, at this point, it is important to provide a brief high level view of the approach the study takes. Consistent with the aim of seeing the transition from professional to executive through the eyes of the participants, the study encouraged the participants to recall their individual leadership development journeys in narrative form over the course of approximately three hours of in-depth interviewing. As Josselson and Lieblich state in describing the nature of narrative research “the aim is to create interpreted descriptions of the rich and multilayered meanings of historical and personal events. The search is for truths unique in their particularity, grounded in firsthand experience, in order to extend and enhance conceptualization and/or to sensitize practitioners to their occurrence.” (2003, p. 259 – 260) This was the aim in this project. It attempted to draw out a rich description of the leadership growth experience from each participant, with the goal of moving one step closer to understanding the first hand experiences of leaders who move from professional to executive, so that this evolving understanding can be shared. And as Josselson and Liebech continue “In that narrative research is a voyage of discovery – a discovery of meaning that both constitute the individual participant and are co-constructed in the research process – researchers cannot know at the outset what they will find.” (2003, p. 260) The way in which the research was conducted undoubtedly influenced what the

participants had to say about their learning, and to that degree the results were co-constructed. However, the aim was to reduce that influence as much as possible, and to allow the participants to talk about what they deemed important, and to relate it in their way. The purpose was to discover their perspective - what they experienced, how they interpreted it, what they found useful. It was not to predict their perspective, compare it to any other group or leadership model, or to judge it as good or bad. Therefore, at the outset, it was not possible, or desirable, to know where this process would lead. It was largely in the hands of the participants.

There was a belief that these experienced executives would be able to identify insights and skills they deemed to be important to their leadership success, and would be able to recall the events and experiences that allowed those insights and skills to develop. Clearly there would be limitations on their memories, interpretations, and what they would be willing to share, but the hope was that the participants would provide a wealth of personal insight that would contribute to our understanding of this important transition from professional to executive. They did, in fact, contribute a substantial volume of information that showed patterns across the group, some unique individual paths of learning, and some unexpected experiences.

Boundaries

The following issues were important to defining what the study would and would not do.

Practical Career Focus: The study was oriented to results that would have practical workplace implications. The intention was to contribute to the understanding of how to support the successful transition from professional to senior leader. Consequently, the focus was on learning that might have implications for career planning, job assignments, leadership development programmes, leadership coaching, and other actions designed to help employees become better leaders. This meant focusing on the time period in which participants were engaged with their careers, rather than looking at issues like the impact of parenting, or activities during childhood and adolescence. Other authors who have taken a more “full life”

approach, for example George (2007) and Thomas (2008a), have included pre-career events to suggest how factors like the influence of a parent, or response to early life challenges have influenced a person's path to leadership. These findings may be very significant to those concerned with the experiences of children and youth, but organisations and professionals planning their own careers cannot go back in time to shape childhood and adolescent experiences. What they can do is influence on-the-job experiences, and outside experiences (volunteering, advanced education, etc.) that occur while someone is engaged with their career.

Questions Not Answered: It is important to address the limits of this study by identifying a number of questions that are outside of its scope. These questions include the following.

Do the patterns that reveal themselves in this group apply to other groups such as leaders in large organisations across Canada, or leaders in specific cultures, or across types of companies and specific professional areas?

Do the participants "walk their talk", i.e. does their leadership behaviour mirror the insights and skills they say they have?

Does the language and word choice used by participants in their narratives reveal subtleties about the culture within which their views were developed or about other aspects of the participants' thinking beyond the basic message they were trying to communicate to the interviewer?

These questions would require other types of studies, or in the case of the last question, a very different form of data analysis.

Relevant Literature

Introduction

This project looks at learning to be a leader through the experiences of a group of successful senior executives. The following literature review establishes the need for this project, and informs the final chapter's discussion of the findings. In Part 1, this review briefly examines the broad field of leadership development to highlight examples of the many theories and areas of research impacting contemporary views on what leaders need to learn. From this we see that organisations, leadership development specialists and potential leaders are presented with a somewhat overwhelming and confusing array of perspectives on what constitutes good leadership, with the bar being raised ever higher. Part 2 examines existing studies that are close in purpose and methodology to this study, i.e. research that looks in-depth at the experiences of established leaders to try and understand how leaders develop their abilities in "real world" contexts. It also identifies the significant gap in the research that this study addresses.

Part 1: How Research and Theory Have Built Expectations re: Leader Competence

Strong interest in the development of capable leaders is demonstrated by billions of dollars of spending by organisations on leadership development activities (O'Leonard, 2010, Ready & Conger, 2003), and by the thousands of books available on leadership topics (Riggio, 2008). The need to improve leadership development efforts has been noted by educators and scholars, and by corporate leaders. DeRue et al observe that "Contemporary organizations operate in environments characterized by rapid change and increasing complexity. As a consequence, the development and education of leaders who are able to navigate and perform effectively in these dynamic and multifaceted environments has become a top priority for organizations" (2011, p. 369). And in a survey of over 5,000 executives across 109 countries, improving leadership development and ensuring a stream of capable future leader was identified as a top human resource priority, due in part to retirement rates among baby boomers and a need for talented people in junior and middle management roles (Strack et al., 2010).

Organisations do need a stream of future leaders, but what would a company, or police service, or school system want their professionals to learn so that they can excel in leadership positions? An historical perspective reveals that leadership is now seen as a much more complex set of abilities than it was just a few decades ago (Bennett, Dunn and Harriman, 1999). In a meta-analysis of leadership impact research published in 2005 and again in 2009, Avolio et al looked at 200 studies and made a distinction between traditional leadership and new genre leadership (Avolio et al, 2005). They noted that traditional views dominated up to the late 1970's with simpler views of the leader-follower relationship based on providing direction, giving support and reinforcing desired behaviours. This included trait, behaviour and contingency approaches. After that "the new leadership approaches emphasized symbolic leader behaviour, visionary, inspirational messages, emotional feelings, ideological and moral values, individualized attention, and intellectual stimulation." (Avolio et al., 2009, p. 766). This historical perspective reveals how researchers and authors began to have many more factors in mind as they expanded the list of leadership attributes and behaviors that could be topics in leadership development initiatives.

This distinction between traditional and new genre views of leadership aligns to a significant degree with a distinction between management development and leadership development discussed by Day (2000) in his frequently referenced review of the leadership development field. In Day's discussion, management is focused mainly on task performance and the application of proven solutions to known problems, while leadership deals with adapting plans and action to the unforeseen, building new processes, helping people find meaning in their work, and achieving results with and without formal authority (Day, 2000). This distinction suggests that learning to be a leader is much more challenging than learning to be a manager.

Prominent Theories

The new era's expanding view of what leaders need to learn was fueled by emerging leadership theories including the examples highlighted below. In a distinction similar to Day's delineation of management and leadership,

transformational leadership introduced a distinction between transactional leaders who manage the process of assigning and rewarding work and transformational leaders who encourage and guide positive changes in individuals, teams and organisations (Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders have been described as having four main characteristics, referred to as the 4 I's. They demonstrate "idealized influence", or the ability to motivate employees in pursuit of a clear vision while earning their respect and trust. They are "inspirational" and can communicate well and help people find the meaning in their work. They provide "intellectual stimulation" by creating environments where employees challenge assumptions, innovate and seek creative solution. And, they demonstrate "individual consideration" by showing an interest in the people with whom they work (Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino, 1991). It is not hard to see why organisations want leaders at all levels who can energize innovations and improvements ranging from small incremental changes to major strategic shifts.

Waldman, Balthazard and Peterson (2011) propose that the ability of the leader to be inspirational is the common ground between transformational leadership and **charismatic leadership**. Charismatic leaders have received a great deal of attention in the literature, and have been attributed with an almost larger than life set of characteristics, and even been referred to as "spellbinders" (Jung and Sosik, 2006). Authors attempting to summarize their distinguishing characteristics describe them as exceptional motivators with compelling vision, outstanding communication skills, the ability to attract followers, and the ability to show people a greater meaning in their work (Jung and Sosik, 2006, Waldman, Balthazard and Peterson, 2011, Ilies, Judge and Wagner, 2006, Conger and Kanungo, 1998). At least in the Canadian context, leaders meeting this description appear to be exceedingly rare, and one is left to wonder about how this view of leadership has been shaped by American culture. It appears to underestimate the degree to which organisations have diverse collections of leaders who have elements of these characteristics, but who may also be introverted, or come from cultures that value humility.

The interest in transformational and charismatic leadership has paralleled growing awareness of the fast changing world faced by organisations and the need for leaders to be proficient in **driving and managing change** (Kotter and Cohen, 2002,

Buono and Kerber, 2010). A major part of the challenge is that “strategic changes are planned, negotiated, implemented, interpreted, reacted to, and continuously altered by people” (Eneroth and Larsson, 1996, p.3). So in addition to having the awareness and judgment required to determine the need for change, and being astute enough to decide on the best changes to make, leaders must anticipate and deal with all of the people issues that arise, including their own self-doubts, ambitions, fears and other emotions.

In recent times, we have also seen a call for **authentic leadership** and **servant leadership**. Avolio et al (2004) define authentic leaders as “persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act upon those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others”. It is suggested that authentic leaders restore confidence in challenging times, and that people need leaders who make their principles and integrity visible (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). An additional dimension of principled conduct is brought to leadership by defining a servant leader as “the leader who models service by humbly serving the led, rather than expecting to be served by them” (Graham, 1991). This is a notion that resonates in times when corporate executives are routinely in the news for putting their own interests above others. In the literature, there is an increasing focus on **ethical leadership** (Brown and Trevino, 2006) that calls for leaders to have a moral base supporting their leadership skill. The emphasis on ethical leadership is, in part, a negative reaction to the idea of the charismatic leader and the tendency to view the leader as hero (Graham, 1991). It has been suggested that charismatic leaders may carry the risk of arrogance, a self-serving attitude that can lead to ethical breaches, and a tendency to ignore advice (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005).

Additional Perspectives and Research Trends

Looking beyond prominent theories, other perspectives and research trends, including the examples below, have had a profound impact on views of what leaders need to learn.

An important distinction has been made between leader development, which focus on the ability of single leaders, and leadership development that addresses

the collective capacity for leadership spread across a team or organisation (Day, 2000, McCauley and Brutus, 2010). This challenges people in formal leadership positions to develop and work with the ability of broader groups of employees to contribute to setting direction, creating innovation, etc. There is also increasing attention to the concept of followership, and the need to pay more attention to the dynamics that exist among followers, and between follower and leaders. (Kellerman, 2012, Popper, 2011). Both of these ideas require leaders to see themselves as contributors to complex systems, rather than individual directors of the action.

“One size fits all” is not an appropriate concept for leadership learning according to a number of authors. It has been proposed that leadership development should be seen as moving from novice, to intermediate, to advanced levels (Lord and Hall, 2005). It has also been pointed out that many organisations assess the specific skills their leaders need to achieve the organisation’s priorities around issues like manufacturing quality and customer service (Riggio, 2008). And, Shamir (1995) has discussed how the skills required to lead may change depending on the social proximity of the subordinates. In this view, the skills required by a senior executive wanting to inspire people from a distance, are not the same as those required by leaders working in a close knit team. It may also be important to encourage women to bring a different approach to leadership than their male counterparts. Women have been shown to differ from men on elements of leadership style and leadership behaviour, and their leadership is evaluated more positively in female-dominated rather than male-dominated work environments (Hopkins et al., 2008).

Views of what leaders should and should not do are being dramatically affected by efforts to apply research in the related fields of psychology and neuroscience to the field of leadership. A key example is work related to emotion with a recent review noting four main themes in the research as “emotional competencies of leaders, stress in leadership, contagion of positive and negative affect, and the effects of leaders emotions on work outcomes” (Rajah, Song and Arvey, 2011). Acceptance of concepts like emotional intelligence (EQ), as popularized by Goleman (1995), has been enthusiastic and swift with organisations using assessment tools and training programmes to measure and promote EQ. The application of neuroscience to leadership has only received major attention within

the last ten years, but Ringleb and Rock (2008) have identified four areas where neuroscience is producing findings directly applicable to the responsibilities of leaders. These areas are decision making and problem solving, regulation of emotions, collaborating with and influencing others and facilitating change. This work is exciting because it is so directly applicable in the day to day interactions leaders have with other employees. It reveals how common workplace factors like stress, perceived threat, loss of status, and apparent lack of fairness can affect a worker's ability to bring the full ability of their brain to the task at hand.

In the big picture of research impacting leadership development, the influence of highly popular books cannot be ignored. For example, in *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*, Collins (2001) has proposed the concept of the Level 5 leader after examining corporations which were able to accumulate impressive records of staying near the top of their business sector. The Level 5 leader is highly committed, and known for humility and the practice of drawing a vision out of highly capable people they have included on their team. And *The Leadership Challenge* (Kouzes and Posner, 2007) draws on repeated employee surveys over more than 25 years to identify 20 characteristics of admired leaders, with the top four being that they are honest, forward-looking, inspiring and competent. They have also asked leaders about when they were at their personal best, and promoted five practices of "exemplary leaders": model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act and encourage the heart.

Comments

Reflecting on this literature as a leadership coach working primarily in large organisations leads the writer to a number of observations. The first observation is that the standards for judging leadership capability have become very high. Looking at the distinctions between management and leadership (or transaction and transformation) suggests that organisations want management personnel to step up to the leadership level, but in fact, the need for management skill does not go away. People need to be strong in both, and at junior and middle management levels in many organisations they are also expected to update elements of their

professional skill set, so they can understand and manage projects and services. Another observation is that the potential “shopping list” of areas for training and coaching is very long, and still growing. Each theory and each research insight from psychology and neuroscience brings the implication that leaders should have a command of different types of understanding and skill. And yet there are a limited number of training days in any year. Making choices about priority learning objectives becomes difficult, and can easily be misguided. A lot of leadership development appears to be selected based on fad and the availability of popular speakers and trainers. And finally, the literature on leadership development does not seem to adequately address individual differences. Western Canada, for example, has many immigrant professionals from Asia moving into supervisory roles. They have been raised in a different culture, worked in a different business culture (e.g. Korean, Chinese, Indian), may not be totally secure in their use of the English language, and then have personality traits layered on top of this background. So we might ask, how does a quiet, introverted Korean woman, who is a brilliant engineer, become a transformational leader in a Canadian business enterprise? Although this woman would be unlikely to phrase it in these terms, this is the kind of on-the-job question that calls out for answers.

Part 2: Studying the Learning Experiences of Leaders

Given the tremendous amount of attention directed at leadership theory and research, there is surprisingly little in-depth exploration of the actual leadership learning experiences of successful leaders in mainstream workplaces (e.g. corporations, government services, public institutions). Searches were carried out to locate this type of research in the literature from 1980 to the present day in PsychINFO and Business Source Complete with combinations of search terms related to leadership (manager, leader, leadership, etc.), leadership development (learning, development, ability, etc.), and methodology (interview, case, narrative, etc.). Searches were also carried out on leadership development and professional categories (nurses, engineers, police, etc.). And, bibliographies of articles related to this and previous sections of this literature review were examined for research involving in-depth leader input. It should be pointed out that the focus was on career learning experiences for leaders in conventional private and public sector workplaces. Studies that examined social psychological precedents of leadership by looking at childhood and adolescence, and studies that analysed the biographies of famous historical figures were not included, unless the research also had a conventional workplace component.

The studies that have explored the leader's understanding of their own leadership development experiences have tended to use in-depth interviews and narrative inquiry. They are discussed below in two categories. The first category is research that has been primarily or entirely made available in book form with a non-academic audience in mind. The major problem with this work is that it is sometimes impossible to access details of the research process to determine its strengths and limitations. The reality, however, is that this type of work has a strong influence on the leadership field. Books like those discussed below are widely read by practicing leadership specialists, and it is not unusual to see them referenced by academic writers. The second category is research reported in academic journals.

Books Reporting Interview and Narrative Research on Developmental Leader Experiences

Four books published in the past 25 years have made use of interviewing to delve into the learning experiences of leaders. The book *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job* (McCall, Lombardo and Morrison, 1988) brought together the results of four studies with 191 successful managers from six major corporations. The subjects were interviewed about 3 events in their careers that led to “a lasting change in you as a manager”, and they were asked to describe what happened, and what they had learned¹. This work demonstrated the critical importance of on-the-job learning experiences including “trial by fire” assignments, learning from others and hardships. It also identified a set of lessons learned grouped under major themes (setting and implementing agendas, handling relationships, basic values, executive temperament and personal awareness).

The book *True North: Developing Your Authentic Leadership Style* (George, 2007) was based on interviews with leaders who discussed the full life spectrum from childhood, to military service, to primary career. One hundred and twenty-five (125) leaders ranging in age from 23 to 93 were interviewed. Most were business people, half were CEO's, half were spread across other organisational levels, and 28% were women. They were all considered to meet the research team's criteria for authentic leaders. In 75 minute interviews, the participating leaders discussed key experiences in their development, the motivation behind their leadership, their views on leadership development and their thoughts on leadership legacy. It is important to note that the research had a significant bias in that it champions the notion of authentic leadership.

For the book *Crucibles of Leadership* (Thomas, 2008a), three groups of leaders were interviewed about life events that they believed were critical to their leadership learning. These events spanned from childhood through adulthood. The first group was made up of 88 highly successful leaders drawn from business,

¹ The underlying research was conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in the early 1980's, and reported in a CCL publication (Lindsey, Homes and McCall, 1987). Noting that the participants in the original study were almost exclusively white men, the CCL did a follow-up with African American men and women using the same main questions but in a survey format (Douglas, 2003).

government, social movements and the performing arts. The second group was comprised of professionals and executives who were involved in leadership development activities at 23 organisations, and the third group was 110 individuals who had attended leadership presentations made by the author. In addition, the study drew examples of critical leadership learning events from the biographies of contemporary business leaders and performing artists. While this book is interesting and potentially useful, it is disappointing in the degree to which the author does not share the details of his research results and method. The book is largely a description of the authors beliefs about leadership learning and a collection of tools that he encourages developing leaders to use. Stories about interviewees are only occasionally inserted, and a check on other publications by the author (Thomas, 2008b, Thomas, 2008c, Thomas, 2009) has revealed that a more detailed look at his research does not appear to be available. Despite its shortcomings, this book does do a very good job of encouraging people to think about the learning events that help people become strong leaders.

The final book in this group is narrowly focused on preparing to be a CEO, but it covers many topics relevant to leaders in a variety of senior leadership positions. The research underlying *CEO's for Success: "What I Wish I Knew"* (Bracksick and Hillgren, 2010) was driven by the observation that effort to prepare new CEOs for success should be guided, in part, by what sitting CEOs wished they had known when they got the job. Twenty-seven CEOs (3 women) of major US corporations were interviewed for approximately one hour each, and the book reveals a great deal about the leadership learning experiences of new CEOs.

Relevant Research Based Papers

Narrative studies examining leadership development began to appear in 2005, however, narrative studies bearing directly on leadership learning experiences are still rare. Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005) have suggested that the use of life-story had been overlooked as an important source of insight in leadership studies, and Shaw (2010) conveys a similar sentiment on narrative's ability to contribute to the understanding of authenticity and leadership identity, arguing that it may help introduce new perspectives where other methodologies tend to reinforce existing explanations. Olivares (2011) reinforces the observation that the

literature has overlooked the experiential side of leadership development, and provides an interesting analysis of how people process “momentous events” to make sense of their essential meaning and develop as leaders. He also proposes that the identification of the past momentous events of individuals in leadership development programmes could help make those programmes more valuable and relevant.

Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005) have offered their own study as an example of life-story research, and gathered their narrative data in two ways. They conducted in-depth interviews with 16 leaders from high tech firms who were in their 30”s and identified as high performers, and they reviewed 10 autobiographies of well known leaders including David Ben-Gurion, Lee Iaccoca, Colin Powell and Nelson Mandela. From this they identified what they referred to as four “major development proto-stories”. These were:

- leadership development as a natural process (with two main versions being “born leader” and “later bloomer”,
- development out of struggle and coping with difficulty (e.g. disadvantaged families, minority status),
- development as self-improvement through learning (with emphasis on learning from experience and reflection, and love of learning), and
- development as finding a cause (e.g. a political or ideological focus). (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler, 2005)

Gronn (2005) countered that the use of autobiographies was inappropriate suggesting that they were written to cast a favourable light on the author, were not consistent with social reality, and projected a distorted heroic perspective on leadership. However, Shamir (2005b) defended the methodology arguing that autobiographies contain useful insights, and allow researchers to formulate propositions for testing in other ways.

A study by Janson (2008) gathered and analyzed 198 leadership formative experiences from 66 organisation leaders who were participating in three different sessions of a leadership development programme. Leadership formative experiences were defined as “those experiences which make a high impact on leaders, resulting in learning relevant to their leadership”, and the author noted

that what matters is not the experiences themselves but how leaders find meaning in them, and how this in turn affects leadership capabilities. Study participants were asked to reflect on their lives and share 3 key events, moments or experiences that had a “big impact on shaping their leadership”. In one session they were asked questions by peers to promote reflection. In the second, a sensemaking exercise followed story sharing. And in the third, there was feedback from peers and the facilitator. The stories were analyzed from a number of perspectives including age at time of experience, focus of the learning (self, relationships, context), emotional valence (positive, negative), and sensemaking mechanism (values driven, coping and struggle, self-improvement, role model experience, symbolic/parental relationship, natural process). One of the interesting observations made by the author was that processes that helped leaders tell their stories, and then elaborate, and reflect on them seemed to promote greater learning.

Hartman, Conklin and Smith (2011) found a way to access leaders’ view on effective leadership without the use of interviews. They did a thematic analysis of presentations made by 12 male white industry executives to undergraduate students. The executives were asked to talk about what had helped them develop as a leader, with reference to their own leadership style and their perceptions of leadership effectiveness. The analysis grouped their comments around six themes, which were full commitment, people orientation, education, difficult challenges, communication and ethics. They concluded that the leaders’ views aligned with prominent ideas in the academic study of leadership.

When executives are asked to share their experiences with students, as in the previous study, there is inherent support for the notion that learning from those experiences has value to potential leaders. The practice of having successful leaders share their stories with students has likely existed for hundreds of years, and Danzig (1999) has shown how analyzing the narratives of leaders can be made a deliberate part of leadership development practice. He had graduate students in a leadership development course interview established leaders and study the experiences captured in their narratives. His work provides a glimpse at how an understanding of real-world leadership experiences, and specific examples of events and experiences gained through narrative inquiry, can be directly applied to

improving leadership development efforts.

Comments

While there are relatively few books and research articles built on in-depth exploration of leadership development experiences, some interesting observations can be made.

- Reiterating what McCall, Lombardo and Morrison (1988) concluded in *The Lessons of Experience*, real-world experience is a very big part of learning to be a leader. Also, the relationship between other types of learning and experiential learning is not clear. One is left to wonder about the roles books, courses and MBA programmes play in what individuals extract from hands-on situations. And following from Janson's point about how leaders can learn more from experiences upon which they reflect, trainers, coaches and mentors are challenged to make the most of opportunities for such reflection.
- Another observation is that a number of the researchers were focused on similar types of learning events. They were referred to as events or episodes that "led to a lasting change in your approach to management" (McCall, Lombardo and Morrison, 1988), "crucible events" (Thomas, 2008a), and "formative experiences" (Janson, 2008). These were significant life events that leaders saw as making a very impactful contribution to their leadership growth. While studies of this type are valuable, they do not provide the full picture, and will miss learning that is slower and more subtle, even though it accumulates to substantial wisdom over time.
- These studies provoke questions about the best way to study the learning experiences of established leaders. Clearly in-depth interviewing and narrative inquiry have promise, as each of these projects was successful in identifying patterns of experience and learning. However, very different perspectives were brought to the analysis in each study with the result

being an emphasis on quite different types of themes. There is a need to identify the kinds of information that will have practical application.

- And a final point is that tapping into the learning experiences of leaders through in-depth methods is just beginning. There is a need to do more work with female leaders, and with different cultures and types of organisations. How would the young high tech leaders in the Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005) study, for example, compare to leaders who had been promoted from construction trades or retail clerks.

This project makes a unique addition to the field by examining the transition from professional to executive with a group of participants chosen to represent a wide variety of professions with an equal split between men and women, and an equal split between large private sector and public sector organisations.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed look at the methodology used in the study, and explains why the methodology was chosen.

Part I: The Choice of Narrative Inquiry

The study used in-depth interviewing incorporating narrative inquiry and these elements.

1. Recorded in-depth interviews with participants providing their input over the course of three interviews lasting approximately one hour each.
2. Open ended interviews with only enough structure to focus participants on describing a) their most important leadership related learning (including insights and skills) as it occurred through time over the span of their working life, b) their understanding of how the learning took place, and c) enough detail to ensure that the nature of their learning could be understood clearly.
3. Encouragement for participants to “tell their stories” in a reflective narrative form, while feeling free to give more concise input when they chose to do so.
4. A focus on exploring the experiences of a small sample (n = 12) richly and deeply.
5. Encouragement for participants to talk about the leadership learning they defined as important, while avoiding cueing them to any specific leadership content from outside sources or other participants.
6. A verification loop in which the interviewer used a significant part of the final interview to summarize the points of learning discussed in the first two interviews, and give each participant an opportunity to provide

feedback affirming, correcting or refining the interviewer's understanding.

7. A second verification loop in which participants were given a brief written summary of each leadership insight and skill they had discussed and asked to identify anything interpreted incorrectly.

The study is characterized as narrative research because the emphasis was on having participants explain their learning by recalling the events and experiences that led to that learning. They were encouraged to tell their stories about how single events or multiple influences had led them to learn certain skills or come to certain insights. In some cases, participants were not able to provide this type of background, but overall, the recounting of experience in narrative form was the foundation of the interview process. As discussed more fully under "What Narrative Brings to this Study", definitions of narrative revolve around both shorter time limited events and broader experiences (Wells 2011, Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou 2008, Patterson 2008, Squire 2008). Definitions focused on events see a narrative as a coherent story related to a particular time period that has an end-point, while definitions that incorporate broader experiences, such as phases of life, allow for narratives in which the story teller draws meaning and explanation from a variety of influencing events and circumstances drawn from different time periods. In making this distinction, Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou describe event narratives as "the spoken recounting of particular past events that happened to the narrator", and they describe experience centred narrative research as "exploring stories that range in length from segments of interviews, to many hours of life histories, and that may be about general or imagined phenomena, things that happened to the narrator or distant matters they've only heard about" (2008, p.5). These authors then go on to make the central point that "What is shared across both event – and experience – centred narrative research, is that there are assumed to be individual, internal representations of phenomena – events, thoughts and feelings – to which narrative gives external expression." (2008, p. 5) This was certainly true in this study. Participants engaged freely in telling their stories, and it appeared to be a comfortable and efficient way of drawing out their personal perspectives. Participants chose to explain their leadership related learning with narratives that covered both events and experiences. In some cases they could recount a specific discussion, meeting or project that gave them an

insight or understanding. In other cases, they talked about observations picked from different periods over many years that gradually led them to conclusions.

The Researcher and Participant Roles

The researcher/interviewer in this study took the role of scientist-practitioner (Lane and Corrie, 2006). He was previously known, or was introduced, to the participants as an experienced executive coach conducting this project as part of his doctoral programme. The credibility of the researcher was an important factor in why these extremely busy organisational leaders found time to accommodate the study. It was presented to them as research that would advance the understanding of how leaders develop in the real world context of large organisations, but it was also presented as an opportunity for them to review what they had learned about leadership during their career, and have it captured for their future reference in a written summary. This was a way for them to reflect on the ideas and fundamental beliefs that had become the foundation of their personal leadership, and to have a capable executive coach record and document it for them. This provided them with a significant benefit, and a reason to agree to participate.

The researcher approached the study with a number of years of experience as a leadership/executive coach. He had read extensively on leadership, and worked with coaching clients at junior, mid-level and senior levels of management over approximately 8 years. Prior to that, he had worked with dozens of leaders as a consultant, and earlier still, he held management and executive roles himself. He therefore approached the study as someone familiar with the issues faced by managers and executives. Coaching and consulting, however, typically address the present and the future. The focus is on the challenges faced today, and the goals for tomorrow. In this project, the exploration was rooted in the past. As such, it was a rare opportunity for a coach/researcher to ask participants to search their past experiences to find the most important things they had learned about leadership as they shaped their path to the executive office.

The participants in the study held the role of highly knowledgeable people respected for their accomplishments and experience. They were given only a

general explanation of the content they needed to contribute, and were asked to use their own judgment about what was important enough to share in the interviews. The researcher held the role of curious listener, setting a general stage to get participants talking, and then showing interest and asking for details on the areas the participants chose to pursue. The role of “listener” was facilitated by active listening and questioning skills developed through training and working as a professional coach, and through work on a number of previous interview based studies.

While the exploration of their personal leadership development through narrative was quite “natural” for these executives, the following sections explain why it was also a preferred methodology for addressing the research questions, accessing a depth of input other methodologies could not access, and solving a number of practical problems related to gaining the cooperation of busy executives.

What Narrative Brings to this Study

This study is fundamentally an exploration of the learning and change involved in growing as a leader, and a number of authors including Polkinghorn (1988), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Josselson, Lieblich and McAdams (2003), Webster and Mertova (2007), and Wells (2011) have shown how narrative inquiry is a particularly useful methodology for exploring events and experiences that have led to significant changes in people’s lives. Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2008, p.1) specifically describe their interest in narrative research as being based on its ability to reveal “different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change”. They point out that narrative research has become a substantial part of western social research with a large number of books and articles now dedicated to explaining its use, and demonstrating how it has been applied in a variety of fields including social work, health and sexuality. The value of narrative research rests, in part, on the long documented tendency for human beings to make sense of, and convey, the important elements of their lives in story form (Mishler, 1991, p. 62 - 63). Webster and Mertova hone in on the learning dimension of change stating that “narrative is well suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience in teaching and learning ...(con’t)

with its ability to focus on critical life events while, at the same time, exploring holistic views” (2007, p.1).

In addition to there being a substantial volume of narrative research on learning in educational environments (Alverman, 2000, Carter and Doyle, 1996, Casey, 1995, Ershler, 2001), narrative approaches have been recognized as useful tools for gaining insight into the personal experiences of careers and in career counseling (Stebbleton and Peterson, 2007; Walsh, 2005; Dagley and Salter, 2004, London, 1998, p. 17). The participants’ narratives in this study revealed the value of all of the types of learning that typically can influence a career, including learning through experience, education and training, association with mentors, observation, and reading. There is also recognition of the role of narrative research in understanding life in organisations (Czarniawska, 1999; Linstead, 2003) , and it has been used to “look inside” the working experiences of people in specific professions such as nursing (Hathorn, Mactmas and Tillman, 2009; Johnson, Tarlier and Whyte, 2003; Poorman, Mastorovich and Webb, 2008). The established application of narrative research in all of these related areas supported its potential to contribute to this project.

While the focus here is on organisational leadership, Sandelowski (1991) describes a very relevant “aha moment” from medical research in which narrative research is revealed as a way to gain insight into patient experiences. She describes how human beings are narrators who produce stories as their way of explaining and interpreting their lives, and discusses how scholars were blocked from certain levels of understanding by earlier methodological views that kept researchers from embracing the rich data available in this naturally human form of expression. When the researcher sets his or her sights on observing specific occurrences or variables using more strictly focused forms of data collection, they miss the opportunity to listen deeply to another person’s experiences as they choose to express them. Consequently, they also miss the opportunity to learn about things they were not expecting, or that could not otherwise be uncovered. Recognizing the many useful ways to work with narrative is just as valuable in the study of “life as leader” as it is for “life as patient”. Narrative research related to leadership can take advantage of the natural way leaders make sense of their lives in stories, and draw out two important types of information consistent with Sandelowski’s

observations. The first type is information that answers questions that the researcher is posing, and the second type is information about the important but subtle aspects of the experience that the researcher could not anticipate. In this case, the study was designed to identify what leaders learned, and what events and experiences provided the learning. However, the challenge was to also listen for the second type of information, i.e. the unanticipated, and to observe things “inside” the life experience of developing senior leaders that would give additional insight or context.

The human tendency to express life experiences in narrative creates a kind of window through which the researcher can make a variety of observations. Webster and Mertova (2007), and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss how people have depicted the events of their personal and community lives in narrative well back into human history, and that since the 1960’s researchers have been evolving methods focused on advancing knowledge through the study of narrative. Webster and Mertova discuss the following points in a useful summary of some of the attributes of narrative research that make it an important methodology, and a methodology suited to this study.

- People use narrative to capture and express memories of the events that have been important to them, or put another way “for organizing our experiences into tales of important happenings” (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 10). In this project, executives were asked to go back over decades to identify areas of learning, and times and circumstances of learning that they deemed important. It was anticipated that asking them to tell stories about this learning would facilitate the process. This type of interviewing allowed participants to recall and communicate a great deal of highly relevant information covering decades of career experiences.
- Narratives are constantly modified and refined as people have additional experiences (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 2). In the context of this study, participants saw their narratives from their current place in life as senior executives. Their accumulated experience allowed them to judge the significance of their experience in preparing them for top leadership roles, something they could not have seen in the same way earlier in their

careers. It is not a matter of their recollections and interpretations being better or worse at different times. They are simply different. However, in this case, they provide the insightful perspective of the executive reflecting back in time on the learning that helped them succeed.

- Narrative is more than the recall of memories. It reveals how people are making sense of life and finding meaning in life (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 2 - 3). The narratives of these leaders reveal something of how they are making meaning out of a career and life as a leader. This insight is vital to emerging leaders, coaches and leadership specialist because leadership can be highly emotional and highly conflicted as developing leaders struggle to determine what they believe and how they should act in their demanding roles. A mechanistic understanding of leadership learning, simply identifying skills and knowledge, fails to provide the same kind of realistic insight into the actual nature of the learning.
- Narrative allows us to look at human activity from inside the experience of the actor (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 10). The process of taking a leader through three one hour explorations of how they saw their leadership learning, including the time they spent thinking about it between interviews, created the opportunity for each participant to share how they lived the experience.
- Narrative research allows a view of experience that is more detailed, complete and whole across time than can be achieved by methods that rely on shorter questioning constrained by time or predetermined points of focus (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 2 - 10).

The following statement conveys how these authors see narrative research contributing to the spectrum of research methodology. “However, we believe that quantitative methods can, in many instances, be rather ineffective with regards to certain important aspects of subjects or phenomena under study. We find that they frequently tend to overlook complex issues, which are, for instance, considered significant by the participants in the research. This happens because

quantitative methods tend not to have the scope to deal with complex human-centred issues. Therefore, we believe that narrative inquiry has a particular value to contribute, as it is well suited to addressing the issues of complexity and cultural and human centredness in research." (Webster and Mertova 2007, p. 3) A similar position is reflected in the following quote that compares quantitative and qualitative research conducted in the context of organisations, something highly relevant to this project. "The complex and contextual nature of all human activity is a central issue for organisational research. In much of the quantitative work, contextual factors are considered to be potentially threatening contaminants to the research design's integrity. The aim is to establish a valid and reliable relationship, which by definition holds irrespective of context. Such researchers are sensitive to the difficulties posed by the complexity of the social world and the ever present risk of spurious correlations. Their aim is, however, to nullify the context and to try to eliminate the merely situational. (con't) by contrast, complexity and context are placed at the centre of qualitative social scientific research on organisations." (Miller, Dingwall and Murphy, 2004, P.332) Leadership is complex. It involves such things as working with complex individuals and multi-cultural groups, managing complicated projects with shifting circumstances, and taking responsibility for difficult strategic issues in varied and changing organisational cultures. As a result, the participants in this study could not be expected to fully describe the leadership learning that mattered most through their eyes unless the methodology allowed them to cover a wide array of topics of their choosing, include substantial detail, and give examples. It was also likely that it would take some time for participants to "assemble their thoughts" and get to the place where they could comfortably and clearly explain the details of their experiences and insights. This served to eliminate any methodology based on short answers. It required an approach that would allow participants to explore their thinking and express it with depth, richness, careful choice of detail, and examples from their complex real-world experiences.

Methodologies that Did Not Fit the Study

The complex, deep and extensive nature of the information required to answer the research questions was important to the process of considering, and eliminating methodologies that would not deliver what was needed. To look further at the implications of the quote from Webster and Mertova in the last paragraph, it is useful to return to the distinction between events and experiences, which have been noted as important elements in narrative research (Wells, 2011, Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2008). This distinction clarifies what the participants had to recall, and demonstrates how human life is a compilation of events and experiences that do not fit conveniently into questionnaires and surveys, if we want to understand them as fully and completely as possible.

The careers of the participants included both shorter learning events, and experiences that played out over longer periods, or might have been on-going at the time of the interviews. The critical learning “events” would be time limited. This means that the participants would see a start and a finish to the time period in which the learning took place (Wells, 2011 p. 5). For example, the learning may have occurred during a specific meeting, or during the months they were responsible for a specific major project, or during the first year they held an early supervisory position. Learning “experiences”, on the other hand, were considered to be aligned with the common notion characterized by the phrase “she has a lot of experience”. With experiences, the learning may have come from multiple influences spread out over considerable amounts of time (Squire, 2008 p. 42). These “collections of experience” would not be considered time limited events as discussed above. Consequently, an executive might explain something they have learned by linking together a number of contributing “pieces of experience” with the overall combination building the learning that they see as important. For example, the overall learning might come from the combined effect of a notable training course, memorable books, working with good and bad leaders over decades, observing other leaders inside and outside their organisation, and likely additional inputs the leader does not acknowledge or remember. This type of learning would cause a participant to reflect and find a common thread that they saw as a significant insight into leadership. In this study, it was important for the interview process to be able to capture both of these types of narrative, and they

could not be captured by methodologies that did not allow for protracted reflection and storytelling. This was confirmed in the actual interviews, when participants commonly moved back and forth between very specific time limited events and learning that involved gradually drawing personal conclusions from influences that came and went over a period of years.

Another practical issue was the anticipated volume of information. The methodology had to capture a large amount of information covering a number of views on leadership learned through an array of experiences spread over decades. Questionnaires and surveys could not accommodate this volume within any reasonable recording/writing space or time frame, and brought the additional limitation of narrowing the focus to issue predetermined by the choice of questions (Bell, 2005. P. 136 - 137) instead of keeping the scope open for the participants to establish the direction of their responses. Retrieving this volume of information was also facilitated by spacing interviews out over a period of weeks, which is a common practice in narrative inquiry (Squire, 2008). This allowed participants to think about their leadership related learning between interviews, and come to the second and third interviews with additional points to contribute. This could not have been achieved with a single occasion questionnaire, survey or structured interview. In general, these methods cut off the human tendency to tell stories and elaborate (Polkinghorn, 1988 p. 163, Mishler, 1986, p. 235, Mishler, 1991, p. 64), and in this study, it was important that participants explore their experiences with breadth and depth, and be less constrained by the research process.

As Bell (2005, p. 167) notes, an unavoidable practical consideration in interviewing is the need to be considerate of participants. It was vital to remember the importance of time and convenience to the participating executives. They were a profoundly busy group of people, typically fully booked every day with priorities they would judge to be more important than a research project. It was extremely fortunate that they agreed to contribute such a large amount of time, but asking for any more time would likely have been a reason to decline participation. There was a need to find the right balance between how much time was required, and how rewarding participation would appear to these busy leaders. Asking them to keep a written log of their memories, or to engage in any other case study

approach that required a significant amount of writing, record keeping or recovery of career documents (Yin, 2003) would have been time consuming and onerous, and therefore something to reject. They were willing to give three hours to the project because it promised to be a useful way for them to reflect on their leadership with the only real requirement being that they be willing to meet and talk.

Bringing participants together in a focus group approach was also rejected because it would have been very inconvenient for executives, and a likely reason to decline participation. It has been argued that focus groups are a good way to draw out personal views and experiences, even on sensitive topics (Wilkinson, 2004 p. 180). However, asking executives to travel to a central location would have greatly increased the time required of them, and coordinating executive schedules would have been extremely difficult. Plus, bringing eight people together for an hour, for example, means that each person has an average of only 7.5 minutes to discuss their career long learning. That was not enough time.

Whether or not the study could be approached from a quantitative perspective was also considered. Creswell (2009, p. 4 – 16) reviews the foundations of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research. He describes how quantitative research typically aims to test objective theories and hypotheses using experimental designs, or to use non-experimental designs with tools such as surveys that are suitable for tracking variables and performing statistical analyses. Beyond the relatively simply description of the sample and the grouping of their responses, this project was not suited to a quantitative approach. This was true because the study dealt with the kind of complex, human-centred exploration described above, and a key objective was to allow it to be shaped by the participants.

As the preceding literature review on leadership development concludes, there has been very little research in which leaders have been asked to reflect on their own learning and growth. So the purpose here was to begin to build a base of information by looking at one group of participants very openly and deeply. It was not to test a theory or hypothesis arising from other research, or to compare this sample to earlier studies. The project was also not focused on diagnosing or improving a situation considered problematical, or on creating or testing a solution

or intervention. This negated the methodologies of action research (Stokols, 2006) and soft systems (Checkland and Poulter, 2006), and experimental approaches using comparative or pre-post designs. This does not rule out the future possibility of qualitative research (i.e. this project) leading to quantitative research (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2006 p. 85) if, at some point in an additional study, the experiences of this group are compared to other populations. However, the current methodology needed to align with the purpose of uncovering a deep understanding of the experience of this small group of professionals turned executives, and that required a qualitative approach capable of producing a rich and detail view of their experiences.

This study can be viewed as a series of case studies of 12 leaders, and the tools available to case study research were considered in searching for ways to strengthen the data or create opportunities for triangulation. This included potentially using documents, archival records, direct observation, and interviewing of third parties (Yin, 2003). Two key issues were whether the events and experiences of interest existed in the present or in the past, and whether any of these methods were practical. Clearly methods that could reach into the past were needed, since most of the development of the participating leaders occurred years ago. Therefore, direct observation in the present was not applicable. It was also not possible to identify any available documents (past resumes, corporate records, etc.) that would have been useful, and tracking down people who associated with these leaders at various stages of their careers (e.g. previous supervisors or colleagues) was not possible within any manageable time frame. Plus, observers from the past could have only provided comment on segments of any individual's career. It was concluded that these approaches would not make a useful contribution.

To summarize, the methodology had to capture rich, complex, original, self-chosen, personal and extensive information from the past, with an appropriate balance between the amount of time required to draw out the information and the amount of time participants would realistically contribute. A series of interviews allowing participants to "tell their stories", in a convenient time efficient manner, accomplished this.

Limitations

One of the most important considerations with narrative inquiry is the degree to which interviews in general produce objective and accurate accounts of events. In this study, it is important to consider if time, human tendencies and/or circumstances have impacted what the participants said about what they had learned about leadership and the events and experiences that led to that learning. Miller and Glassner (2004) and Silverman (2005 and 2006) discuss how researchers have debated the degree to which interviews reveal “truth”. They describe different perspectives on the accuracy of interview content, including the views of positivists, emotionalist and constructionists. Positivists seek to control the research process so that interview reports are as close as possible to external realities. Emotionalists argue that the emotional state of the interviewee, including how they react to the interview and interviewer, can shape responses. And constructionists propose that interviews are the products of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. This type of study gives the interviewee a great deal of latitude in how they chose and form their responses. Consequently, it would be expected that emotional factors, and factors related to the interviewer/interviewee interaction might influence participant input. Discussing the limitations of interviews from a slightly different perspective, Creswell (2009, P. 179) notes that interviews a) provide indirect information filtered through the views of interviewees, b) provide information at the place of the interview rather than in the field, c) are possibly biased by the interviewer’s presence, and d) are influenced by the degree to which people are articulate and perceptive.

It is important to acknowledge how the factors listed above could have impacted this study’s interview process. Emotions shift over time and circumstances and impact interviews (Silverman, 2006 p. 126), and could have played a part. Participants may have been more or less comfortable revealing sensitive information about their careers, or they may have had an emotional need to have the interviewer see them in a positive light. It could be argued that few executives are comfortable being seen as weak or less competent than their peers, and consequently they may have shaped their stories to emphasize strength and competence. It has also been pointed out that one of the main functions of peoples’ narratives is in establishing what we tell ourselves and others to create a self-view that we are comfortable with, and want others to share (Bruner, 2004).

As Polkinghorne phrases it, narrative research exploring someone's life produces "life stories that provide self-identity and give unity to the person's whole existence" (1988, p. 163). It would not be surprising if some leaders aligned their stories with an existing self-view, an aspired to self-view, or a view of themselves as a good leader. On the other hand, the researcher's experience with executive coaching, and his prior knowledge of some of the participants, suggests that many leaders are comfortable discussing their personal learning with a high degree of personal exposure and vulnerability.

The impact of interviewer-interviewee interaction can be explored by asking if the participants would have provided different information, or shaped their input differently, if they had been talking to someone other than the interviewer. For example, would they have recounted different learning events, or said different things about what they had learned from those events, if they had been talking to a peer, or a younger employee who they were mentoring? And, if they would have said something different to different people, which version would be closest to the "truth". On the positive side, it could be argued that talking to a skilled interviewer, with the skills required to probe and explore, could uncover information that others would miss. Also, as Squire (2008, p. 48 - 49) points out, the interviewer has a choice in how much they engage with the interviewee. If they want to encourage co-construction of the discussion, they can talk with the interviewee in a more back and forth approach. Or, as was the case here, if they want to limit their interference, they can provide limited structure and primarily take the role of listener with questions focused on clarification.

Creswell's point about interviews being limited by their lack of direct interaction in the field is also significant in this study. An executive seated comfortably in their executive office, and recalling an event that occurred 25 years earlier while they were struggling with a challenge as a young professional, most certainly would not reveal details available to an onsite observer at the time. It would also be expected that their version of the events could shift over time as they reframed and reinterpreted the events (Silverman, 2006, p. 126). Squire points out that one of the assumptions of an experience-centred approach to narrative research is that "narrative involves some reconstruction of stories across times and places" (2008, p.44). It would be expected that a professional might describe a highly stressful

day with certain kinds of details and emphasis right at the end of that day. A year later, the story would evolve as new perspective is gained, and twenty years later the story would be reshaped in other ways. However, the story that is available when an interview is conducted is still rich with information that would be otherwise hidden.

We can gain perspective on the limitations of narrative research by reflecting back on the purpose of the study. That purpose is to see the development of senior leadership ability through the lived experiences of a group of leaders who made it to the top ranks of large organisations. Within practical constraints, we want a clear picture of the events and experiences they believe were central to helping them learn about leadership, and we want a clear picture of the insights and skills they believe were developed through that learning. A key point is that we are constrained by their beliefs. Could their beliefs about their experiences and learning have been incorrect?

It is possible that during their interviews a participant did not recall certain events or experiences that actually were important to their leadership growth. In a long career, a certain number of important experiences could have simply been forgotten. As Bell notes “Memory plays tricks. If you were asked to say which television programmes you saw last week, could you remember everything?” (Bell, 2005, p. 140) Another possibility is that they could have misjudged the significance of some occurrences, and discounted them. For example, they could have gone through a time when their supervisor and others around them saw major growth, but in their own minds years later, it was not important enough to bring up in the interviews. It could also be asked if some of the experiences and learning reported could have been fabricated, or at least modified significantly. It would be very difficult to measure or identify a level of deliberate misreporting, but there was never a sense that these leaders were introducing experiences that did not occur. It is, however, likely that over years the telling of workplace “war stories” is shaped in many ways by stressing certain points, downplaying or not mentioning other aspects, adding humour and human interest, and interpreting results for desired emphasis.

Hyden (2008) provides important insight into understanding what might be “sensitive” for people sharing their life stories. She uses the example of hearing the

experiences of a woman in the sex trade, and realizing how profoundly different she and this woman were in what they considered sensitive. While the life circumstances of the participants in the current study are vastly different, it is still important to consider the kinds of topics participants in this study might have found sensitive to the degree that they would not include them in their narratives, or only include them in limited ways. There may well have been personal areas of learning that the participants held back for reasons that others would not predict. At the same time, the participants did share a very large volume of information on their learning experiences, and some of it was related to very personal, and even traumatic, learning experiences.

Overall, in considering the narrative based interview process , it is vital to be alert to these issues, and to seriously consider underlying questions such as, "In what ways can our questions and responses to interviewees regulate the research conversation and its outcomes?", "What does it mean that stories are not necessarily told consistently over time and place?", and "What are some of the social constraints on storytelling, such that people may prefer to tell one story over many?" (Gergen and Davis, 2003, p. 242 - 252)

Another important consideration is the degree to which someone interpreting another person's narrative can understand the depth of the storyteller's experience. Discussing this issue, McVicker Clinchy discusses bias as "the tendency to see the other in the self's own terms" (2003, p. 41). Andrews points out "All of us bring to our research knowledge which we have acquired through our life's experiences, and indeed how we make sense of what we observe and hear is very much influenced by that framework of understanding. This position is not static, but evolves over the course of our lives. New experiences, and the understanding of old experiences, bring with them a new perspective not only on our own lives - our present, as well as our pasts - but on the way in which we make sense of the lives of others." (2008, P. 86) This factor raises questions about how the stories of leaders were interpreted at a number of points in the process of this study. During the interviews, the interviewer's questions were undoubtedly influenced by what he believed he had understood from a participant's earlier statements. This would have been influenced by the interviewer's personal experience with organisational life, leadership and interactions with leaders. These elements of the researcher's

experience would also be expected to influence his overall interpretation of participants input as recordings were reviewed and analyzed. The investigator can be perceived as an instrument in the research process of collecting and analyzing interview data, and there is a need for the researcher to cultivate their awareness of their own experiences and preconceptions (McCracken, 1988, p.18 - 33).

Andrews (2008 p. 87 - 89) also raises a related issue that may be perceived as either a weakness or strength of narrative research. Her point is that researchers pay attention to aspects of a participant's story that appear to be tied to their research interests. As a researcher conducts interviews, and analyzes those interviews, they selectively notice what appears to be relevant to their investigation, and ignore other aspects of the input. Andrews suggests that this is positive in that it allows the original researcher, or other researchers, to return to the data later with new questions to explore. However, it also suggests that a researcher looking through a narrow perspective could miss points that are outside of their perspective but still relevant to the topic they are investigating.

Part II: Applying Narrative Inquiry in This Study

Authors addressing narrative inquiry have pointed out that researchers gather and explore narratives in different ways, for different purposes, and even with different views of what constitutes narrative. Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou comment (2008, p.1) "Unlike many qualitative frameworks, narrative research offers no automatic starting or finishing points. Since the definition of 'narrative' is in dispute, there are no self-evident categories on which to focus as there are in content-based thematic approaches, or with analyses of specific elements of language. ...In addition, unlike other qualitative research perspectives, narrative research offers no overall rules about suitable materials or modes of investigation, or the best level at which to study stories."

One could summarize the "state of the art" of narrative research by saying that it has gained substantial credibility as a qualitative methodology, while maintaining flexibility in its application to a broad range of research topics. The discussion in the previous sections has shown how this type of research has been used to explore changes in people's lives as revealed through their stories, and particularly

changes involving learning, and workplaces. This study also focuses narrative inquiry on learning in the workplace as a way of revealing the growth of leaders. Given the “flexibility” with which narrative research is conducted, it was important to identify an underlying set of criteria that could be used to shape the study, and ensure that it meets standards appropriate to good narrative research.

Squire (2008) has reviewed the process of conducting general types of narrative research and concluded that there are guidelines to follow. This study parallels her guidelines for experience centred narrative research that attempts to study life narratives, which include biographical accounts of significant parts of the lives of research participants (in this case careers). Squire concludes that researchers doing this type of work tend to do the following (Squire 2008, p.47-49).

- Use small numbers of interviewees
- Sample participants theoretically, with little attempt at randomization
- Sample opportunistically
- Use repeated interviews, i.e. two or more
- Use a semi-structured interview approach, deliberately managing the degree of interviewer participation

This study is consistent with these guidelines with 12 participants, selected through a network of relationships, and interviewed over 3 occasions. The main consideration in sampling was attempting to have a broadly distributed group of large organisation senior executives, not clustered in any one category that might weight the results. Therefore, the sampling was spread across men and women, public and private sectors, and a number of professions and types of organisations (see the Project Activity chapter for full details). The interviews were only structured to the degree that they directed participants to explore the various phases of their careers, to identify what they had learned about leadership in the areas of insights and skills, to identify the main events and experiences contributing to that learning, and to do it with enough detail to be well understood. Beyond that, the participants were free to chose the information they shared, and the interviewer avoided directing or shaping their input. A basic assumption was that the participants were the best people to decide on what learning had been important to them, and to relate the supporting stories. Squire concludes that semi-structured interviews can be seen on a continuum “depending

on where the researcher thinks 'narratives' live" and "If you place the story within the person, you may simply ask for 'their story' intervening as little as possible." (2008, p. 49) In this study there was a strong attempt to minimize the interviewer's intervention.

This study could be characterized as a variation on a critical event study. Webster and Mertova state that "A critical event as told in a story reveals a change of understanding or worldview by the storyteller." (2007, p. 74) They note that critical events can impact work-related performance. They create change, and interestingly can only be identified after they occur. The events this study seeks to identify are critical events in this sense. However, as previously mentioned, the study also seeks to identify much broader and longer experiences that also drove change in the leadership of participants.

Squire (2008, p. 48) points out that researchers interested in how commonalities or differences in narrative themes show up across groups tend to use larger samples structured to allow comparisons. This would be appropriate for future research in this area, once some initial insight into the narrative themes of leadership evolution is established. This study is attempting to contribute to an initial base of knowledge on what types of themes or patterns of learning executive see in their own lives. The goal is to look deeply into the experiences of this group of participants, rather than to systematically compare this group to other groups, or to compare sub-groups within this sample.

Addressing the Limitations

The limitations of interviews and narrative inquiry identified above raise at least two important questions for this study. The first question is "How has the study been carried out to reduce the impact of these limitations?" And the second question is "Do these limitations create any kind of critical flaw in this study to invalidate its observations and conclusions?"

A key limitation is the recognition that an individual's recollections as expressed in an interview are not exact fact by fact representations of events as they occurred. As Squire (2008) points out, some researchers interview a number of people who were in a position to observe and recall the events of interest. This approach was

considered, but rejected, in this case because the events of interest were spread out over decades, and it would have been impossible to track down and access enough people who were with the participants at various stages in their careers to substantiate or discount the stories being told. Indeed, it has been noted that in story-telling based research, this kind of triangulation is almost impossible to execute (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p, 91). In addition, a major part of each person's narrative was the very personal process of interpreting and understanding what they experienced as they drew their own conclusions about leadership, and that was not something that others could observe, or judge as factual or non-factual. As Squire explains "Experience-centred narrative researchers think we can understand personal experience stories because of narratives' second defining feature: narratives are the means of human sense-making." (2008, P. 43) This study is very much about how the participating leaders have made sense of the many experiences that have come together to shape their leadership beliefs and behaviours.

Miller and Glassner present a view that is useful in summarizing the challenges related to narrative interviewing. They conclude that "All we sociologists have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us, some from our interactions with others. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, which sorts of stories they are, and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use in theorizing about social life." (Miller and Glassner, 2004, P.138) In writing up this study, it was important to clearly acknowledge the issues attached to interviewing, and to report the process fully so that it is open to the review of others. In addition, it was possible to take steps to reduce the impact of the limitations that are inherent in narrative interviewing. This included creating a safe, comfortable context for the interviews, guaranteeing anonymity, working with a relatively long time period to enhance participant recall and comfort with the process, and giving participants opportunities to verify the researcher's understanding. Overall, there appeared to be no reason to believe that the input of these top organisational leaders was not significant and valuable.

Confidentiality and Ethics

An assurance of confidentiality brought at least two major benefits to this study. First, it hopefully allowed participants to feel more comfortable in sharing information they might consider sensitive. And second, it protected the participants from the future possibility that they would be identified and criticized for something said in their interviews.

In discussing the planning of narrative research, Josselson and Lieblich (2002, p. 267) point out that researchers need to think carefully about how participation in narrative research could impact the lives of those who agree to share their experiences. Executives are used to being “in the spotlight” and are routinely criticized and “seconded guessed” by those around them. Some may feel that they do not need the confidentiality and protection afforded to more vulnerable groups (e.g. adolescents, patients, the poor). However, an executive’s reputation is vital to their future, and this study asked them to share experiences from times in their careers when they were taking risks, feeling insecure and learning on-the-go to handle difficult challenges. Many authors freely name executives in biographical books or books promoting certain leadership philosophies or models (e.g. George, 2007; Thomas, 2008). In those cases, the leaders are often positioned as positive examples with emphasis on why they have been successful. In this case, the leaders also revealed when they made mistakes or struggled on a personal level. Plus, in their interviews they shared a private view of their experiences that would not otherwise be available to a broad audience. Gergen and Davis ask a question that is highly relevant to this situation, “How can researchers maintain the integrity of their relationships with the people interviewed as their stories are moved from the private to the public domains?” (2002, p. 254) It was concluded that identifying these leaders, and potentially putting them at risk of additional criticism, would not maintain that integrity and meet necessary ethical standards.

Protecting the identity of an executive, however, is not easy and requires more than not using their name. A number of the participants are well known, and could be identified by specific events, or by a combination of their location, position and industry or field.

As mature, experienced people, participants were likely to make their own decisions about whether they would discuss their contribution to the study with anyone else. The researcher took the position that it was important to protect participants from any possible negative repercussions, and therefore took the following steps. 1. All reporting was written with precautions that prevent identification of individuals. 2. The agreement to maintain anonymity and confidentiality was presented to participants in writing. 3. Participants were encouraged to not inform anyone else of their participation until after they completed all three interviews and could assess whether they had revealed anything that might be a concern.

Analysis

Narrative research can involve a number of different modes of analysis, and it is important that the analysis fit the question(s) being investigated. This project captured approximately 36 hours of interviews densely packed with a number of kinds of information, and there was a risk of “not seeing the forest for the trees”. As Mertova and Webster caution “The consequent analysis by researchers may result in them digging into the data so deeply that the essence of a narrative approach is missed – that is, the criticality of an event and its impact on human understanding and action.” (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 73). While this study focuses on both events and broader experiences, the connection to the participants’ gained understanding, and how they saw its connection to their action as leaders, is the essence of what the analysis sought to draw from the data.

Phoenix (2008, p. 64) lists a variety of ways of approaching narrative analysis that have been used in recent years. These include analyzing specific events, broader experiences, themes, the temporal ordering of plots, episodes and drama, the nature of the interaction when narratives are shared, social context, and the qualities of the conversation and discourse. This simply acknowledges that analysis can go in a number of directions. Here, it was important to focus the analysis on what has been categorized as “content” (Wells, 2011), and to use a thematic analysis (Howitt and Cramer, 2010) to reduce the large volume of content down to a manageable number of themes that still accurately represent the input of each individual and the group. The critical content addressed what the participants had

learned about leadership (views, approaches and skills), and how they had acquired the learning (events and experiences that promoted learning and development). The analysis included both case analysis and cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990). The first job of the data analysis was to identify the “what” and the “how” for each participant. This allowed for the identification of patterns and themes in each of the careers the narratives revealed (case analysis). It also set up the ability to determine where themes and types of learning were shared across a number of participants, and where some participants had quite unique aspects to their leadership development paths (cross-case analysis).

Analysis focused on the details of language, word choice, and the style or construction of the participant’s storytelling was not central to answering the research questions. Consequently, analysis was not focused on these issues. Similarly, analysis of issues such as what these narratives reveal about the cultures in organisations, or contemporary views of leadership was not central to the study, but general observations and questions related to these areas are discussed with the findings and conclusions.

One of the important issues impacting analysis is how the narrative itself is seen by the researcher (Squire 2008 p. 50). For example when narratives are used to explore traumatic life events or social problems, they might be seen as a source of insight into underlying psychological or social issues. With such attempts to look inside the personal lives of individuals and groups, it is not hard to see how difficult, and how speculative, the process could be, and why Squire concludes that more than one interpretation may emerge. This study sees the narrative of the participants in quite a practical light as the best available window on the leadership learning experiences in their careers. As discussed in the section on limitations, the glass in this window may be blurred by memory, emotions and the passing of time. However, it still provides the best available view of career long leadership learning, and that view is full of useful information. So in considering the strengths and weaknesses of the overall study, the information provided by participants is approached with caution and questions about how it may have been shaped by the passage of time and the dynamics of the interview process. However, in the actual data analysis, participant input is accepted as the participant first presents it, and as they judge it to be a good reflection of their

learning after a verbal and written summary had been reviewed by them. This is consistent with the stance described by Patton (1990, P.450) of “letting participants speak for themselves”.

An unplanned, but useful aspect of the analysis was a revisiting of the data after a 10 month break. Andrews makes the following comment about coming back to the data after a period of time with a somewhat different perspective. “Using examples from my work, I have argued that historical changes, as well as changes in our individual life circumstances, provide us with opportunities to see new layers of meaning in our data. These subsequent interpretations and re-interpretations should not always be regarded as supplanting earlier understandings, but rather as complementing them, a picture taken from a different angle as it were.” (Andrews 2008, p. 98) She goes on to say that coming back to narrative data at different points in time takes advantage of the data’s “ability to yield more layers of meaning”. This was certainly true in this case. Carrying on with the work of executive coaching with the study in mind, talking to other professionals interested in leadership, and additional reading, all allowed the researcher to go back to a second in-depth review of the data and see things not seen in the first weeks of analysis ten months earlier.

Research Quality – Transparency

The process of recording the interviews, and establishing a clear and retraceable connection between what participants said and the resulting observations and conclusions, was managed with the goal of making the study as transparent as possible. All interviews were recorded digitally with technology that allows time coding of specific content and quotations. A summary of what was learned, and the events and experiences that led to the learning, was prepared for each participant. These summaries detailed the content in the interviews that was relevant to the research questions, and isolated key quotations demonstrating the content. Each entry of relevant content was noted with precise time codes indicating the beginning and end points in minutes and seconds, e.g. interview #1 from 7:35 – 9:00. Therefore, with the current ability to share audio files, another researcher would be able to cross check any element of participant input, and how it has been interpreted. With appropriate software, this can be done in a very time

efficient manner, without the interference of transcription errors or the loss of the subtle aspects of speech (tone, emphasis, voice volume, etc.) that can affect meaning. This ensures that the whole process is open to peer review. To maintain the ethical standards of the research, such sharing of the data would have to be handled with appropriate confidentiality agreements.

Research Quality as Viewed in Narrative Inquiry

A number of authors conclude that traditional notions of reliability and validity do not fit narrative research when it comes to assessing research quality (Moen, 2006; Webster and Mertova, 2007; Wells, 2011). Narrative research differs from quantitative or experimental designs in that it “seeks to elaborate and investigate individual interpretations and worldviews of complex and human-centred events” and “It is more concerned with individual truths than identifying generalisable and repeatable events.” (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 89) Consequently, standards specific to narrative research have evolved, and this study has been guided by those standards.

One of these standards focuses on whether the researcher has understood and accurately documented what the participant was communicating. This has been discussed as fidelity (Blumsfeld-Jones, 2003) or by rethinking the idea of reliability to focus on the accuracy and accessibility of the data (Webster and Mertova, 2007). In this study, if we viewed this standard through the eyes of participants, they would feel that the study had accurately captured both their recollections of the events and experiences that had shaped their learning, and an understanding of the insights and skills learned. Certainly one of the principles underpinning many of the writings on narrative inquiry is the idea of listening actively and deeply to get as close an understanding as possible of another person's experience (Polkinghorn, 1988; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Andrews, 2008). One of the ways to enhance the level of fidelity or accuracy is to include verification checks (Moen, 2006). In this case, a summary of the researcher's understanding of what had been learned was read back to each participant during their third interview so that could refine or correct that understanding. In addition, a summary of each participant's key learning was given to them in writing to give them a second opportunity to correct any misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

Another common standard for narrative research concerns the degree to which participant stories are trustworthy or believable (Wells, 2011; Blumsfeld-Jones, 2003; Webster and Mertova, 2007). Judging this is aided by familiarity with the participants' environment, including the social, cultural and institutional context (Moen, 2006). This familiarity was provided by the researcher's own extensive experience with the life experiences of managers and executives, and by two other very experienced leadership coaching professionals who reviewed the key points of learning and the experiences of participants. Overall, the impression was that the participant input was highly believable.

Conclusions re: Methodology

In-depth narrative based interviewing has provided a strong methodology for tapping into a large volume of otherwise hidden information on the leadership learning experiences of these corporate and public sector leaders. The process was efficient enough to allow these extremely busy executives to participate, but deep, whole and open enough to access the needed big picture of their development and a great deal of supporting detail. This has helped the study gain important insights into the nature of the learning that helped propel these individuals from front line professional roles to top executive positions.

Chapter IV: Project Activity

This chapter provides a detailed look at the steps involved in completing this project, with observations on the factors that helped or hindered the research process.

Confirming the Potential Value of the Study

As indicated in the introduction, the initial idea for this study arose from a series of personal observations that came through working as an executive coach. These personal observations came together as different project options were considered, and they eventually shaped the study that would go forward. There appeared to be significant value in allowing professionals and developing managers to effectively see inside the experiences and the learning of a group of successful leaders who had gone before them. It wasn't that senior leaders were deliberately hiding the secrets of their development. They were simply too busy moving forward, and did not have convenient ways to share their insights. Studying their experiences would make a significant contribution to taking the evolution of senior leadership from private and hidden to open and observable. In addition to being useful to employees wanting to develop their leadership capability, it would be of interest to other coaches, leadership specialists and researchers.

To further validate the usefulness of the project the researcher discussed it with:

- two people responsible for large corporation leadership development programmes,
- four other leadership coaches, and
- five of his own coaching clients who had transitioned from professional to manager (three were in junior or mid-level management positions, and two were senior executives) .

The purpose was to gauge their perspective on the value of the information such a study would produce. These people showed a great deal of interest, and shared a number of examples of things they would like to know about the perspectives and learning processes of senior executives. These included such things as how

executives managed to develop an understanding of the whole business when they started out as narrow professional specialists, and how they developed their beliefs about working with people. Overall, there was a strong endorsement of the idea that such a project could provide helpful insights to both developing leaders and professionals focused on leadership development.

Gauging Willingness to Participate

The next major step was to identify a methodology that would deliver the needed information, while being seen as reasonable in the eyes of the executives the study would rely on. One of the first steps was to arrange discussions with 5 executives to seek their perspectives on what they would be willing to do. This produced a consensus around the following points.

- Their participation had to be at times and places convenient to them.
- The research interviews would not be high priorities in their calendars, and could need to be rescheduled at short notice.
- They were willing to do a series of interviews, but it would have to keep them interested or maintaining their involvement would become a problem.
- The process had to be simple, and not include a lot of preparation.
- They wanted to learn something from the process, and receive an article or summary to allow them to see how their input compared to the other participating leaders.

This proved to be an important step because it quickly established how executives were likely to respond to a request for their participation. There were things that they would and would not do, and they were looking for some benefit in return. This information was combined with the methodological considerations described in the previous chapter to set the approach the study would take. This approach was confirmed through discussion with the project advisor.

Choice of Participants

The next major step was to set targets for the number of participants, and the nature of their backgrounds and leadership experience. Interviewing each participant for approximately 3 hours would produce a large amount of data, and it was important to keep the study manageable. At the same time, there was a wish to include a diverse group of senior leaders with representation from private and public sector organisations, men and women, and a number of professional categories. This was consistent with the form of purposeful sampling identified by Patton (P. 182, 1990) as maximum variation sampling, “purposefully picking a wide range of variation on dimensions of interest”. While it was understood that the study would not be generalisable, the hope was to provoke thinking about the issues that might be involved as professionals make their way to senior roles across many types of organisations. This meant avoiding an over reliance on one or two professional categories such as engineering or nursing, or one or two types of organisations such as government departments or banks.

Another key consideration was the number of men and the number of women to include in the sample. While men clearly continue to dominate the ranks of senior executives in corporate Canada, it was the researcher's experience that there was a great deal of interest in the learning processes that took women to the top of organisations. The small group of women who would participate in this study would not be a representative sample of any larger group of women leaders, but if their experiences were similar to, or distinctly different from the men in the study, it might suggest questions for further investigation. After considerable thought, it was decided that the sample should be evenly split between men and women, even though the recruitment of women executives could prove more difficult, given the limited numbers of women in top positions in many large organisations.

Consistent with the need to keep the data volume manageable, and with established practice in narrative research of using relatively small samples in this type of study (Squire 2008, p.47-49), it was decided to seek 12 “senior leader” participants. In addition to having the 12 leaders evenly split between women and men, the goal was to split them evenly between private and public sector backgrounds. Additionally, they would ideally come from a wide variety of professions and types of organisations.

For this study, it was also important to consider the definition of “senior leader” that would be applied during recruiting. In some companies, for example, vice presidents are members of the executive committee and contribute directly to key decisions. In other organisations, vice presidents may be well down the chain below executive vice presidents and senior vice presidents, and may actually be specialists managing small teams. It was decided that the recruited senior leaders would be management personnel with a) high level decision making ability, b) significant personnel leadership responsibility, and c) significant strategic or practical influence in organisations of more than 1,000 employees.

The leadership coaches and specialists who were consulted in the early stages of planning raised a vital question about the “quality” of the leaders to be included in the study. The underlying issue was how to know if the study was listening to “good or strong” leaders versus “bad or weak” leaders. They pointed out that some leaders reach high level positions, but then fail to gain respect, or even have a detrimental impact on their organisations. Experience in executive coaching certainly shows this to be true. In fact, it is sometimes the reason a coach is hired to work with a senior leader.

The resolution of the good leader versus bad leader dilemma involved the following thought process.

- Different people value different qualities among leaders. The same leader can be praised and criticized by people who hold different perspectives.
- The executives needed for this study could react negatively to the notion that they would be subjected to a pre-test that would determine if their leadership was at an acceptable level. Plus, this would introduce difficult questions about a) the specific test that would be valid in making that assessment, and b) who would make the assessment. In a company, for example, this would mean asking who would judge the competence of the CEO, and by what criteria? Attempting to do this would likely over-complicate the research process, and make it likely that leaders would decline.
- While the fact that someone has been promoted to a top job does not mean that they are doing that job well, it does mean that someone in authority judged them to be worthy of promotion. This suggests that while

they may have weaknesses, they have accumulated capabilities that raised them up in their organisation.

- There is no practical way for a research recruiter to observe executives they do not work with on a regular basis.
- In the community that is made up by the employees of an organisation, and by its stakeholders, high profile leaders often have a reputation. While this reputation may not fully reflect reality, it would seem unwise to ignore it when it suggests that a leader is either highly respected for building and advancing their organisation, or highly disrespected due to their destructive impacts on people and organisational success.

This thinking led to the conclusion that the selection of leaders for the study would be guided by two criteria. The first criteria was the fact that they had been promoted to an executive position. Large organisations have thousands of people to choose from inside and outside their employee group. The fact that someone is given such an important role suggests that they demonstrated significant capability in previous management positions. Obviously, the people who made the decision to promote them could have had poor judgement, but the researcher could certainly not argue that his judgement was superior. The second criteria was less tangible and it brought a significant bias to the sample. This criteria was reputation. Leaders who were reputed to be respected according to the information available to the researcher were favoured. Leaders who were disrespected due to factors like negative treatment of employees or damaging effects on their organisations were not approached. As discussed in the findings, the participants in this study showed a strong orientation to leadership beliefs that favoured the respectful and positive treatment of employees. The bias introduced during recruitment could be significant to this and other findings.

The Recruiting Process

Recruiting was done through existing relationships. Lists of executives known to either the researcher or one of his colleagues were prepared and matched to what was seen as an ideal mix of participants. A number of the potential participants were current or past executive coaching clients of the researcher. Potential clients not previously known to the researcher were suggested by other coaches or

associates, who kindly agreed to approach these executives on the researcher's behalf. Once these people introduced the idea of the study to the executive, the researcher followed up with the information needed to finalize the executive's buy-in.

This direct approach through existing relationships made the study possible. In two cases, executives were sent written invitations to participate, without the benefit of having someone they trusted make the request. In both cases, they did not even acknowledge receipt of the request. On the other hand, when the request was presented directly by someone they respected, the success rate was high. The participation of 12 top leaders was arranged with only 15 such direct requests. Those who did decline all did so on the basis of being too busy with other demands.

Whether the researcher's previous relationship with an executive would impact their input to the study was carefully considered. From the point of view of sampling, there was no reason to believe that these leaders had different learning experiences than other executives, except that they had worked with an executive coach, and specifically the coach who was conducting the interviews. The vast majority of their leadership learning experience, however, occurred well before their work with the researcher began. Therefore, that experience was not impacted by their relationship with the researcher. What might be impacted was the way that they reported that experience in the interviews. On one hand, they might be expected to be more trusting and willing to go deeper into certain experiences because they already knew and trusted the interviewer, and were comfortable discussing quite personal issues with him. On the other hand, they might have had experiences that were inconsistent with the image of themselves that they had previously shared with the researcher as he served as their executive coach. This could make them reluctant to bring that experience into an interview. Given the nature of narrative research, it is likely that the comfort and trust that is developed in a coaching relationship contributed positively overall.

As part of the recruitment process, participants were given a short background document explaining the study, the commitment to confidentiality, and the benefit they would receive through voicing their learning and experience and having the

foundations of their leadership learning summarized. This background document is included in Appendix I.

An overview of the participants is provided in Table I (P. 61), and in short profiles that describe each individual without specific information (i.e., names, positions, name of organisations) that might reveal their identity (P. 62 – 64). While the original intention was to focus on organisations having at least 1000 employees, the actual employee count of the represented organisations ranged from approximately 2000 to over 80,000 employees.

An Important Note on Confidentiality

As this document begins to discuss the participants, it is important to take a moment to consider the steps required to keep their contributions confidential. The question of how to report the participation of each interviewee without violating confidentiality was considered repeatedly at different stages of the project. As participants agreed to be part of the study, it became obvious that it would be difficult to keep some of them anonymous. There are so few women in chief executive roles in Canadian corporations, for example, that simply naming a business sector and saying that the CEO was a woman would effectively name the woman. Even listing all of the represented business sectors would create a very short list of senior executive women who could be in the study. Therefore, it was decided that business sectors would not be identified.

It also became clear that the location was an important variable in identifying participating executives. There is, for example, only one police chief and a very small number of university presidents in any municipality. Consequently, reporting is no more specific than to say that these leaders held their executive roles in five Canadian cities.

It was also clear that many in the group of participating leaders had very high public profiles. At certain points in their careers, it is not uncommon for both private and public sector leaders to be discussed in the media, or to be topics of conversation within their fields or industry. As a first step in limiting the ability to identify them in the reporting, their names have been changed. It was also important to recognize that certain specifics about their careers and experiences

would be widely known, or would at least be recognizable to people who had been fellow employees or interested observers of their organisations (e.g. people in competing companies, major investors, members of public interest groups). While the richness of narrative reporting is greatly enhanced by giving the details of the stories of participants and including quotations, in this report some stories and details have had to be deliberately avoided because they are distinctively associated with certain high profile leaders. In other cases, experiences are not associated with even the fictitious name because the pattern in the larger life story could identify an individual to someone who knew their career.

Table 1: An Overview of the Study's Participants

Number	Descriptions of the Participants
12	Total number of participants (n=12).
11	Total number of organisations from which participants were drawn.
5	Number of Canadian cities where participants held executive positions.
4	Number whose careers were largely in one organisation .
8	Number whose careers included multiple organisations .
6	Number with substantial private sector leadership experience. These participants came from 4 different business sectors.
7*	<p>Number with substantial public sector leadership experience. These participants came from the following types of organisations.</p> <p>Federal government Provincial government Urban government Health service University Police service School system</p> <p>* One participant had both private and public sector experience.</p>
6	Number who have held the top executive position in a large organisation.
6	Number who held other executive positions (e.g. executive vice president, senior vice president, director, national general manager).
6	<p>Number of women, with initial professions as follows:</p> <p>Engineers (2), Economist, Teacher, Nurse, Lawyer</p>
6	<p>Number of men, with initial professions as follows:</p> <p>Lawyer, Engineer, Computer Specialist, Teacher/Lecturer, Police Officer, Social Worker</p>
7	Number with a previous relationship with the researcher.
5	Number with no previous relationship with the researcher.

Participant Profiles

The recruiting process succeeded in securing the participation of a highly experienced and diverse group of senior leaders. Understanding the project is aided by having a sense of who these people were as professionals and as executives (Note: One was recently retired.). The following profiles change the names and avoid details that might reveal identities.

Catherine had the opportunity to work side by side with senior executives while she was still a young professional. Early on she believed that she had the ability to learn what would be required to succeed as an executive herself. It was a male dominated culture, and she did not have the engineering background that many people assumed was required to understand the technical aspects of the business, but her credibility grew. She held senior roles in two major companies before making the move to CEO of one of them.

Michelle started her career as a somewhat shy classroom teacher who loved children. She developed a deep value for education, and her drive to improve the educational experience sustained her work from teacher, to principal, to manager, and ultimately to the top position of a large urban school district. Her days are spent working with an elected board, leading a management team, driving initiatives that impact dozens of schools and tens of thousands of children, fielding input from parents and interest groups, and interacting with the media.

Valerie is known for her progressive ideas, and is highly respected within her industry. She regularly finds herself speaking to groups and handling media interviews across the country. Early in her career she did engineering research, and after moving to a junior role in government, she advanced to an executive position in an important arm of the Canadian government. She has since moved to the private sector where as CEO she enjoys leading a smaller, but more agile organisation.

Lorraine has carried the weighty responsibility of managing two large urban hospitals at the same time. She began her career as a critical care nurse, and quickly moved into managing a critical care unit. She credits this experience with helping her learn that she could handle pressure and higher levels of responsibility.

After working in patient care environments for many years, she moved to a senior role in health services planning.

Adele holds a high profile position as a top leader in a Canadian provincial government. Her background is in law, and most of her work has focused on government, with her career including provincial, national and international roles. She deals with difficult policy issues, manages billions of dollars of public funds, and provides leadership to thousands of public employees.

Bev is an engineer who knows about working in the field, and gaining the respect of the men who build and maintain technical operations. She has held a variety of engineering and business roles in different companies in her industry. Now she sits on the executive committee of a major Canadian company, and is tasked with helping that company evolve the strategy that will bring it success in a demanding and ever changing environment.

Marshall recently retired as CEO of a large public company. Over the years, he had proven himself as a frontline engineer, and gradually taken on more demanding projects and positions. He worked in a number of companies in his industry, and witnessed a number of different approaches to top-level leadership. He was a CEO himself before the age of 40, and most recently ran a larger company with international operations. He now sits on corporate boards and continues pursuing his passion for local and international causes.

Craig has gone from public school teacher to university president. Along the way, he has worked in a remote Canadian community, done international development work, completed a PhD, taught university courses and served as Dean. He has led his university through a period of major growth and change, and is a high profile leader in the city in which he lives.

David learned about policing as an officer on the street when many senior police officers had an old-school military approach to leadership. He has seen police services evolve over the years, and has championed many new initiatives and a progressive view of police leadership. He now holds a very senior position in a major urban police service.

Len has been recognized as one of Canada's top corporate lawyers. His current role as a senior executive in a large corporation, still demands his legal abilities, but it also requires his understanding of organisations and business. He has worked in companies with distinctly different cultures and leadership styles, and has grown in his ability and credibility as a business leader, rather than simply a lawyer.

Michael began his career showing great skill as a software developer. He gradually learned that he also had a head for management, and could be a leader of people. He began in a tiny start-up company that gradually grew through its own success and mergers and acquisitions. Eventually, it was bought by a large international firm based in the USA. He held the top Canadian position in this firm, and was a contributor to business strategy internationally. Shortly before the study began, he left the world of the large corporation for the excitement of building a new company from the ground up.

Justin worked with troubled kids in a facility that brought him face to face with a side of life he had never seen before. He wasn't sure that it was a good fit for him, but his abilities were recognized and he was promoted. He started to understand that he could make a difference, and he returned to school for a graduate degree in social work. Eventually he would become the senior leader for a large collection of community services in a major Canadian city. He learned to keep his focus on the quality of services and policies, while balancing the pressures of politics and organisations competing for funds.

The Interview Process

A series of three interviews of approximately one hour each was conducted with each participant, and all of the interviews were completed in a period of approximately 4 1/2 months. The time required to complete the interviews for any one participant ranged from five weeks to nine weeks. In all cases, there was at least one week between interviews with any individual. This was done intentionally to give them time to reflect further on what they would contribute at the next interview. All of the interviews were conducted by the principal researcher, and all but five were conducted at the offices of the participating executives. Two were conducted in a coffee shop near the executive's home at his request, and three were conducted in business/social clubs.

Prior to setting up the interviews, there was an e-mail communication between the researcher and the participant, and in some cases there was a face-to-face meeting and/or phone discussions. Prior to the first interview participants received a brief background document on the study (Appendix I). In all cases, the executives had their assistants schedule the interviews. This very likely meant that these assistants were aware of the executives' participation in the research, and understood at least something of the nature of the research. It is very common for executive assistants to have access to an executives e-mail, and to have at least a general understanding of the meetings in which they participate. This meant that the researcher did not have full ability to keep the participation of the executives anonymous. However, executive assistants are typically constrained by formal or informal confidentiality agreements with their employers, and each participant was fully in control of the degree to which their assistant was aware of the project.

With the exception of their assistants, some participants made it clear that they wished to keep their role in the study confidential. Others appeared to be very comfortable letting their colleagues know that they were part of a study on leadership. For example, if they encountered a colleague outside their office while the researcher was coming or going, they would introduce the researcher to the colleague and explained that he was there to conduct a research interview. The degree to which these executives shared information on the specific nature of the study was unknown.

The first interview with each participant began with a review of the confidentiality commitment and the purpose of the study. The executives were also told that they would receive a written summary of the key things they have learned about leadership during their careers, as they shared them with the researcher. The participants were encouraged to not tell anyone else about their participation in the study until they had completed all of the interviews. This precaution was intended to a) increase their comfort with sharing sensitive information, and b) give them a chance to be fully aware of what they had contributed before they told anyone else about their participation. As indicated in the previous paragraph, some participants chose to ignore this suggestion.

Each first interview had a similar structure. Participants were asked to discuss the important things they had learned about leadership during their careers, and to tell the interviewer about how they had learned these things. It was suggested that they could go about this in any way that was comfortable for them, and it was suggested that they might approach their careers chronologically or simply begin talking about points of learning or experiences as they occur to them. The interviewer followed along with whatever approach the participant decided to take, and asked further questions to seek clarity or complete the understanding of the point the participant was making.

Two other forms of significant guidance provided by the interviewer over the course of the three interviews were asking each participant to consider all of the phases of their career from their first employment to the present day, and asking them to address both learning where they gained an understanding of leadership (i.e. a helpful insight) and learning where they acquired a skill that helped them be a better leader (e.g. public speaking). Other than providing a minimal structure to the interviews and ensuring that essential ground was covered by each participant, the interviewer took the role of respectful and enthusiastic listener, encouraging the participant to elaborate, give examples and explore additional points when the current point had been dealt with fully.

It is important to note that the interviews were not guided by ideas about leadership drawn from other sources such as books, leadership models or leadership ability inventories. Interviewees were also not asked about points raised by other participants. The goal was to allow each participant to define their

own list of things that they had learned about leadership, while minimizing any influence on the topics they chose to discuss.

All interviews were recorded using an iPad with recording software capable of "time coding" each discussion. This meant that the specific point in time at which an element of the discussion began and ended could be document. After each interview, the recording of that interview was reviewed, and the documentation process began while the interview itself was still fresh in the interviewer's mind. This first review of each recording also allowed for a check on the degree to which the interviewer had allowed each participant to identify the learning points and experiences they felt were important, and had not shaped or directed the course of the interview. There were a small number of occasions when the interviewer's comments could have influenced the course of the conversation, but overall the participants were strongly in control and directed their comments to the content they felt was important. This quick review of each recorded interview proved to be an important step in both understanding the essence of the points the participants were making, and keeping the quality of the interviewing high.

The Participants' Response to the Interview Process

The executives came to the interviews with varying levels of preparation. Some had obviously been thinking about their participation in the study. Two of the participants even had a number of pages of handwritten notes. At the other end of the spectrum, two of the leaders knew that they had agreed to participate in research but had to be reminded of the topic when they arrived. All of them proved to be supportive and enthusiastic. While they sometimes addressed issues in a matter-of-fact style, they naturally fell in to a narrative approach with stories of the events and experiences that went far back into their careers. A number of them included stories from their first summer jobs when they were students, and all of them readily identified early, mid and late career experiences that they believed shaped their leadership.

The approach that the participants took to the interviewing included a number of surprises.

- All of the participants appeared to have done a great deal of thinking about leadership, and specifically about their beliefs about leadership. It was not surprising that they had reflected on leadership, but it was surprising to see the extent to which this reflection had taken place, and the degree to which they all had a great deal to share.
- Because they had thought so much about their leadership, the participants most often identified what they had learned, and then considered the events and experiences that had led to that learning. They could immediately identify something they believed about good leadership, and then they would go back and explain the learning that had brought them to that conclusion. This contrasted with the researcher's expectation that they might have to review certain experiences in their life, and then reflect on what that experience had taught them.
- The extent to which participants had prepared for the interview process actually had very little impact on the volume or quality of their contribution. Even those who had to be reminded of the focus of the research promptly fell into the discussion with point after point and story after story about what they had learned. Again, this reflected the degree to which they had thought about leadership and talked about leadership in the past.
- The degree to which these executives had defined their beliefs and captured them in stories was a living example of the observation that people's narratives help them create meaning and define who they are. Also, the fact that these individuals "carried" so much of their career experience in their narratives made the study possible.

While all of the executives engaged readily in the process, it quickly became clear that three interviews would be the practical limit. The first participants into the process demonstrated that they were "running out" of input by the third

interview, and were getting anxious to wrap up this use of their valuable time. This suggested that the process had struck the right balance between gaining as much information as possible and keeping the participants engaged.

Documenting the Interviews

Experience with the first 3 - 4 interviews led to refining the way in which the spoken interviews were captured in detailed written records. Originally, a template was designed to facilitate note taking as the interviews proceeded. The template focused on recording significant events and experiences. It turned out, however, that the template had to be abandoned. The participants moved around too freely in their discussions, and it became impractical to try and isolate events and experiences as they were spoken. In addition, participants tended to focus on what they had learned, rather than on the events and experiences that led to that learning. Consequently, the template did not fit with the natural inclination of the people being interviewed.

After the first few interviews, note taking was restricted to recording observations on the interview process including such things as the participant's comfort level, the general content they were covering and points to be followed up on in subsequent interviews. It became obvious that more detailed documentation of the interview content was best accomplished by slowly listening to each interview recording, and playing back sections repeatedly. This took approximately 3 1/2 hours per recorded hour of interview, and resulted in a typed record for each participant that centered on the important things they believed they had learned about leadership. A summary of each leadership topic they addressed was typed up, and each topic was followed by detailed notes on what they had said about the topic and the events and experiences that resulted in learning about that topic. This resulted in a total of 189 pages of interview notes overall. All of this information was time coded to allow it to be tracked back to the specific time in the first, second or third interview when it was discussed. Many topics were discussed at least twice, and sometimes the participant came back to them repeatedly. Documenting their discussions in this way made it possible to quickly replay the comments around any given topic by playing back the precise sections of each digital recording that dealt with that topic. This was facilitated by using

software that allowed a listener to move directly to specific places in each recording without having to rewind or fast-forward. If, for example, the section of the interview that was of interest was at 14 minutes and 10 seconds, it became possible to go directly to that point in the recording to hear it again. This created an efficient way to check and recheck the interpretation of interview content. It also made that interpretation entirely transparent and accessible should another researcher wish to review the interviews and compare them to the resulting interpretations of what each participant said.

This process resulted in a document that accumulated each participant's input as they moved through the first, second and third interview. The first version documented only the first interview. The second version of the document added new points raised in the second interview, and added any elaboration, examples or refinement that the second interview contributed to points that had been raised in the first interview. The third version combined all of the information from all three interviews, again adding any new points that were raised and any refinement to previous point that the participant added in the third interview.

Verification by Participants

There were two "verification loops" in the work with each participant. The first verification was done verbally using a substantial portion of the third interview. The interviewer read back a summary of the important things the participant had learned about leadership as the interviewer had identified them from the first two interviews. This was done one topic at a time, and the participant was encouraged to correct or refine anything that did not fit with their understanding of what they have learned. It should be noted that this was a very confident and assertive group of people. They did not give any sign that they were reluctant to make corrections or clarifications. Frequently, they also added new content by giving additional examples or elaborations. This verification allowed the researcher to have a high level of confidence that the points of learning had been interpreted as the participants intended, or that the participants' suggested improvements were understood.

It is important to clarify that this first verification focused mainly on what had been learned. There was often discussion of the events and experiences that led to that learning, but the available time did not allow for a thorough review of the events and experiences associated with each learning topic. It would have taken more than the hour that was available, and eliminated the possibility of the participants contributing additional points that they had thought of since their last interview, or that occurred to them during the verification discussion. It is also important to note that these additional points, which were typically contributed in the last 15 – 20 minutes of the final interview, were not subject to this first verification because they were introduced afterwards.

The next verification was done in writing. Each participant had been promised a brief, easily read summary of the most important things they had learned about leadership during their career. After the third interview, the main points of learning for each leader were summarized into such a document, and e-mailed to the participant for their review and critique. Again, they were requested to identify anything that did not correctly reflect their view of what they had learned. This verification was limited in two ways. First of all the executives had made it clear that they would only have time to read a brief summary, and making it brief meant limiting the amount of detail they would review (see example Appendix II). Being brief meant using short descriptions of the understandings and skills the leaders had acquired. The second limitation was that there was no way of knowing how thoroughly participants would review the summary, if they read it at all. Nine of the participants acknowledged receipt of the summary, and said that it effectively captured their input. Two of those people sent it back with minor editorial improvements. The other three participants did not respond. The meaning of this lack of response is unclear. These three may have not read their summary, or felt that there were no substantial changes to point out.

Analysis - Focus on What was Learned

As discussed in the Methodology Chapter, the data analysis used a combination of case analysis (looking at each individual) and cross-case analysis (searching for commonalities and differences) (Patton, 1990). The first part of the analysis used case analysis focused on what each participant had learned about leadership. This

information had been summarized for each individual and verified as discussed above. In this next phase, cross-case analysis was used to find both recurring themes across the group and individual areas of learning that were rare or unique. Both the case analysis and cross-case analysis were thematic in approach (Howitt and Cramer, 2010), with the aim being to reduce the large amount of interview data down to a limited number of themes that as closely as possible represented what the participants had contributed. The identification of recurring themes required finding areas of learning that were common to a number of the participants. For example, if one leader discussed learning how important it was to build strong teams, the analysis had to determine how many other leaders had also stressed learning about the importance of strong teams. This would determine if there was a pattern across the group. If, however, the importance of strong teams was only discussed by one participant, their attention to this topic would be unique. Patterns across the group would demonstrate that even though these leaders had come from many backgrounds and types of organisations, they shared areas of leadership learning that they deemed important. Unique or rare topics identified by only one or two participants would suggest that learning to be a top leader can involve different paths of learning, with individuals acquiring different perspectives on leadership.

Since each individual's important areas of leadership learning had already been documented for the verification process, there was a list of these "areas of learning" for each participant. To determine if an "area of learning" for one participant was also an "area of learning" for other participants, it was compared to all other areas of learning across the whole group. If there was a need to clarify if the areas of learning for two people were substantially the same or different, the detailed interview notes and the digital recordings of the relevant sections of their interviews were revisited. To conclude that two participants shared an area of learning, the content of what they had both learned had to be substantially the same. The two participants may have described their learning in different ways and emphasized different points, but if they had learned the same skill, or gained a very similar insight into leadership, they were determined to have shared an area of learning. A thematic chart is presented in Appendix IV to demonstrate how common areas of understanding and insight were identified. The chart shows which individual participants discussed the sub-themes that came together to form

the common areas of learning described as central themes in the Findings. This demonstrates how the thematic analysis extracted the themes at both the case and cross-case level. A similar process was used to identify common skills and common learning experiences.

The fact that these leaders had thought a lot about the complex nature of leadership determined how many areas of learning there would be to process in the analysis. Consistent with the structure of the interviews, the areas of learning were considered in two broad categories. The first category was learning that advanced the participants' understanding of leadership. These were areas where they identified important insights and perspectives gained during their careers. Without being prompted or told what other interviewees were saying, participants had contributed a total of 289 insights and perspectives that were important to their personal understandings of leadership (i.e. approx. 24 per person). The second area of learning concerned the acquisition of more specific skills that supported their leadership. These skills were quite diverse, and included such things as writing well, public speaking, supervising different types of people and thinking strategically. Interestingly, participants were much more interested in discussing what they understood about leadership, and often seemed reluctant to discuss their personal skills. Collectively they only named 90 skills that they believed they had learned that were important to their leadership success (i.e. approx. 7.5 each).

This part of the analysis was relatively simple, but it was very time consuming. To find the patterns and unique elements in the data on insights and perspectives, a large chart was constructed on an erasable whiteboard with the names of each participant across the top and areas of learning down the left side. Building the chart began with listing the areas of learning for one participant on the left, and then comparing them to the areas of learning for a second participant. Then the areas of learning for a third participant were compared to the first two, and so on until all 12 participants had been compared to all others. To keep the chart manageable, unique or rare areas of learning that had been entered early in the process were gradually removed, as it became clear that they were not shared by many in the larger group. These unique or rare areas of learning were recorded on another list. As the process moved towards completion, unique or rare areas of

learning went directly to this other list. In that way, the chart captured all of the shared areas of learning that had been mentioned by three or more participants. The chart was large enough to record point form reminders of what each participant had said about each area.

Once a shared area of learning was identified, it was possible to go back into the detailed notes that had been compiled for each participant in that area to confirm, and extract the essence of what had been learned about leadership. At this point, quotations that most effectively demonstrated the learning were also identified.

The next challenge was to review the rare or unique areas of learning related to leadership insights and perspectives. An immediate observation was that many of the leaders who had not spontaneously mentioned them might have acknowledged that they actually believed something similar if they had been asked directly. The rare or unique points were not radical. They had just not stood out to most participants as worthy of being on their lists of most important things learned. However, the fact that one or two participants had focused on these issues when others did not suggested that they were particularly important to how these people viewed their roles as leaders. The analysis, therefore, mainly involved reflecting on what these unique perspectives said about how these individuals had come to understand their roles as senior leaders.

The areas of learning that concerned skills were charted and compared in the same way that the perspectives and insights were charted. Charting the skills was much easier given that there was a much smaller number of identified skills, and areas of learning that proved to be shared.

One complicating factor was that it was sometimes difficult to separate “understanding” from “skill”. For example, one participant said she had the skill of being able to maintain an autonomous view of an issue, and not be swept up by the opinions of those around her. This could be seen as an important leadership insight, i.e. that a leader needs to be able to hold their viewpoint and not be overly influenced by group sentiment. Or, as the participant defined it, it could be seen as a skill, i.e. actually being able to do this as opposed to simply understanding its value on an intellectual level. It was decided that if the participant spoke of something as a skill, and if it involved being able to do something, it would be

treated as a skill. As the analysis progressed, it became apparent that most of these less obvious skills were mentioned rarely, while the most frequently mentioned skills were more concrete, e.g. problem solving, public speaking.

Analysis - Focus on How the Learning Took Place

The second major phase of the analysis focused on what the participants said about how they had gained the understandings and skills that were important to their leadership. This meant looking at the roles of experience, mentors, training courses, etc. The first challenge was to determine the most meaningful way to approach this part of the analysis. The relevant research question was, “What events and experiences do these successful executives credit with accelerating or boosting their leadership related learning as they moved through the transition from professional specialist to senior leader?” Answering this question would provide an insider’s view of how these leaders saw the learning opportunities that mattered most in their personal transitions. Keeping with the notion that there was value in studying this type of leadership growth through the eyes of people who had gone through it, an important question was “How did the participants tend to make sense of these many experiences scattered across their careers?” Or put another way, “If you listened carefully to the participants, did they see certain kinds of experiences as essential to their learning?”

As mentioned earlier, the participants tended to organize their thoughts around what they had learned. They would begin a new phase of one of the interviews by talking about an insight they considered important, and then they would talk about how they gained that insight. Often, in fact, the interviewer had to specifically ask them to think back and identify how the learning took place. This wasn't always the case, but overall, it seemed much more natural for them to first talk about something they had learned about leadership, and then to continue by describing the circumstances that led to the learning. Given that this sequence was so natural for the participants, and given that it appeared to be a very useful structure for communicating the nature of the learning to others, it was decided that the analysis of how the learning took place should follow the same pattern. That is to say, the analysis would look at each significant area of learning, and then go through the interview data to determine how that learning took place.

An example is useful in explaining how this was done. The findings indicate that all of the participants had learned about the value of treating employees well and showing them respect. This was a shared area of learning. In this part of the analysis, the focus was on how they had learned about this topic, and that was determined by looking in detail at what each participant said about this area of learning to identify how the learning took place for them. As discussed above in the description of the analysis of common insights, this was case analysis done on a thematic basis, that in turn made it possible to do cross-case analysis and identify where participants had achieved the learning in similar or different ways. Looking at the example of treating employees well and showing them respect, many of the participants talked about leaders they considered good models, and leaders they considered poor models. The good models were leaders who showed them behaviours they felt should be emulated. The poor models were leaders who helped them define the type of leader they did not want to be. It was very common then for the participants to have learned about this area by observing these good and bad models and reflecting on the kind of leader they wanted to be.

The analysis of how the learning took place was very similar to the analysis of what had been learned. In both cases, the focus was on analyzing content. It was a matter of listening carefully and documenting interview details to isolate what they had said about something they had learned, and then going back a second time to isolate the content that described the learning process. Throughout this process, notes were also kept on factors that provided context. This included such things as a participant's approximate age at the time events were unfolding, how long they had been in their position, key people in their work life, and significant pressures in their personal lives.

A Brief Article and a Delay Bring Value

At a point when most of the analysis was completed, the project was stalled for approximately 10 months due to critical events in the researcher's life that demanded his attention. This unexpectedly brought two improvements into the study's process. The first improvement was the writing of an article that summarized the findings of the study as they were understood to that point. This was done because the participants had been promised a brief report that would

allow them to see what resulted from their contributions, and they were curious about how their comments compared to the other senior executives in the study. Since the length of the delay was hard to predict, it was decided to write a summary article for the participants before the project was finalized, rather than make them wait some additional number of months. The writing of this article required that the researcher make sense of the data, and gain a full appreciation of what the study had achieved as it was “visible” at that time. This proved very useful because it greatly accelerated the process of bringing the large volume of data down to something meaningful, and then simplifying it to a place where it could be communicated to others. The article was shared with a number of coaches and leadership development specialists who helped the researcher explore its implications. The other improvement in the process was the delay itself. It was helpful to step away from the study for a few months, and then come back to reread all of the interview documentation, listen to a number of the interviews again, and rethink observations and conclusions. This confirmed the main points in the interim article, but introduced a number of significant refinements.

Summary Comments on the Process of the Study

The use of in-depth interviews that allowed the participants to talk freely and at length in a narrative style produced a wealth of useful data. This approach also made the study feasible because it was something that these extremely busy executives could see themselves doing without a great deal of preparation, and without a process they would see as onerous. They actually enjoyed participating in the interviews, and brought a great deal of enthusiasm to the process. It was clear that they wanted to be helpful. It was also clear that they valued receiving a summary of their leadership related learning. They tended to describe the whole process as a rare opportunity for them to reflect on their leadership. This created a sense of partnership between the participants and the researcher, and encouraged the participants to go deeply into their experiences.

On a practical level, the study proved manageable and it proceeded efficiently. The study attracted a diverse and respected group of senior executives who had all begun their careers in relevant professional positions. The degree to which they

had thought about leadership issues and reflected on their own leadership was impressive.

The decision to let the participants choose the areas of leadership they would discuss appeared to be a good one. They had no trouble identifying leadership related learning they believed was important, and there was a high level of confidence that the participants and not the interviewer had determined the results. Having said that, the process of reviewing the interviews did reveal that there were a small number of occasions when the interviewer's comments could have encouraged a participant to discuss a topic they might otherwise have ignored. This would be an area of improvement to address in a future study.

Overall, the study stayed focused on the research questions, and the analysis extracted a great deal of useful information from the stories and explanations of the participating leaders. This made it possible to come to a number of important findings, and to define a number of important questions for further investigation.

Chapter V: Research Findings

Structure of the Findings

The participating executives contributed a wealth of useful and thought-provoking information. The findings are reported here in a manner that is consistent with the researcher/participant relationship discussed in the Methodology Chapter. The participants are viewed as the best people to identify the learning that has been important to them, and the aim is to reveal how they have made sense of their experiences, without imposing any reinterpretation of the findings that would leave participants feeling that their input had been changed to fit another perspective. The aim is to understand what the participants have revealed as they have described it. The findings are described in this chapter under the following sections.

Part 1: The Most Common Insights and Skills. This section describes the most frequently mentioned areas of learning that participants identified as being important to their personal success as leaders. It focuses on 18 areas of insight and understanding, and 6 types of skills. It also provides an overview of the complete range of insights and skills participants discussed to allow the reader to see how the most common areas of learning fit into the full picture of topics discussed.

Part 2: Categories of Learning Experiences. This section provides an overview of the main types of learning experiences (e.g. reflection, good and bad models, challenges) that contributed to the acquisition of leadership insight and skill.

Part 3: Unique Leadership Style. While many of the insights shared by participants were similar, this section discusses how all participants were in some ways unique, and how some the executives developed an approach to leadership that had a very distinctive emphasis or style.

Part 4: Profound Change. This section describes the profound personal changes that some participants saw as part learning to be a leader.

PART 1: The Most Common Insights and Skills

Shared Insights

While the participants each put their own interpretation to the topics being discussed, there was substantial overlap in the areas where they had gained important leadership related insights or understandings. There were 18 areas of leadership insight that came up with more than half (i.e., between 7 and 12) of the interviewed executives (Table 2). This is notable considering that private sector leaders focusing on matters as different as infrastructure and software, and public-sector leaders in areas as divergent as senior government, patient care and policing were all saying something very similar on these topics.

Table 2: The Most Common Areas of Insight and Understanding	
Discussed by between 7 and 12 participants.	
In order of most frequently discussed to least frequently discussed.	
1	Treat people with respect
2	Stand on values and principles
3	Serve the organisation not yourself
4	Teams are the basis of success
5	Leaders create solutions
6	Seek ideas and knowledge beyond your own
7	Acquire broad understanding of your field or business
8	Focus on the core issues that really matter
9	Deliver and expect quality
10	Work at understanding others
11	Cultivate influence
12	Match jobs and people by looking for alignment of passion, values and skills
13	Be willing to reveal what you care about and how you think
14	Encourage provocative debate
15	Learn to handle aggressive and challenging personalities
16	Take care of yourself when challenges at work and at home create pressures
17	Leading change is difficult and complex
18	Build trust in all your relationships

Overall, within this group of participants, there was substantial similarity in how men and women, and public and private sector leaders, identified these common areas of important learning. Table 3 lists the only areas of learning where there was a difference of more than 1 person in the number of women and men, or private and public sector leaders discussing the area.

Table 3: Notable Male/Female and Public/Private Differences in Mention of Insights		
Insights where the number of women versus men discussing them differed by more than 1. (For all other insights the difference was 0 or 1)		
# of Men	# of Women	Insight
4	6	Insight # 6 - Seek ideas and knowledge beyond your own
5	3	Insight #9 - Deliver and expect quality
Insights where the number of private versus public sector leaders who discussed them differed by more than 1. (For all other insights the difference was 0 or 1)		
# Private	# Public	Insight
5	3	Insight #12 - Match jobs and people by looking for alignment of passion, values and skills
5	2	Insight #14 - Encourage provocative debate

Within the group of participants who discussed each of these overlapping areas of learning, there were participants who made the area of learning a central topic in their discussion, and there were participants who raised the same general ideas while they were focused on a related issue. An example is useful in describing how this actually played out in the interviews. Both approaches could be heard if one was to listen to the recordings of the participants who discussed the difference between serving an organisation and being self-serving and arrogant. Those who made this a central topic were actually likely to say that it was an important issue in their beliefs about leadership, and they tended to give the topic a fair amount of time. For this topic, Marshall and David were good examples of this approach.

They named the topic clearly using words and phrases like arrogance, steward leadership, egotism and serving the organisation, and they stated that avoiding arrogance and focusing on service was an important principle leaders needed to learn. Catherine and Valerie also expressed very similar beliefs, but they expressed them in the context of discussing other topics. Catherine did it while talking about understanding the difference between the person and the position, and pointing out that some leaders lose perspective on their purpose and get swept up in arrogance when they occupy top positions. Valerie addressed similar issues while discussing the difference between leaders in her organisation she did not respect because they pursued person agendas and status, and a highly respected mentor who placed other people above himself. While these four people demonstrated what might be labeled direct and indirect approaches, they all revealed a very similar understanding of leadership, and were therefore considered to have a shared area of learning related to the difference between serving an organisation and being self-serving and arrogant.

These 18 most common shared areas of insight are each described below in order of most frequently discussed to least frequently discussed. Each description provides the following.

1. A representative **quotation** from one of the participants.
2. A **summary of the central theme** expressed by participants who addressed the aspect of leadership.
3. **Examples of participant perspectives.** These are the final versions of the summary statements that were provided to each participant in the verbal and written verification loops. They provide a concise synopsis of what a specific participant said on the topic.
4. A point form list of **related insights.** These are examples of closely related ideas that build on the central themes. They are classified into two categories. The first category includes points discussed by the participant(s) as something they had learned. The second category includes points observed in the participant's personal experience, i.e. it describes something that happened during this person's career, even if they did not "label" it as one of their areas of learning. To acknowledge

this distinction, points in the second category have the word “observed” in brackets following the participant’s name.

5. Identification of the **common learning scenarios**. This is a brief summary of the common types of experience, reflection, modeling, etc. that led to the learning. Additional discussion of the events and experiences involved in the development of these common insights and understandings is provided after all 18 areas of learning are reviewed.

While a more concise description of the areas of insight was possible, a great deal of what the executives were trying to convey would have been lost. In the context of work based research, it was deemed important to capture content the participants’ believed had “on the job” implications. The reporting also reveals values and priorities etc. to give a sense of the speaker as a person.

Shared Insight #1: Treat people with respect

“You have to genuinely, and with extreme integrity respect everybody who is in the room ...in such a way that they can actually feel that respect, such that they feel comfortable that you want to hear from them. And there are many people who can mimic, or can pretend that there is respect but there actually isn’t, and I think humans are extremely sophisticated beings, and I think they always know if you respect them or not.” – Catherine

Central Theme

Showing interest in people, respecting their contributions, and treating them well brings out the best in people, and greatly benefits your organisation. Leaders who try to dominate and control are badly misguided.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Show interest in people and they will support you. People at all level of your organisation, and in outside industry groups, volunteer organisations etc., are motivated to support senior leaders who take the time to interact with them and treat them with respect. Show everyone from board

members to cafeteria workers that you care about them and their concerns. - Marshall

- Tyrants may get the job done, but they don't instill loyalty. They can get compliance through fear, but it is not sustainable. It is better to treat people with respect, and to balance a concern for getting things done with a concern for people. Get people committed to doing things for the right reasons, rather than spending your time criticizing people for making mistakes. – David
- "Bullying" or pushing people into cooperation may well achieve results in the short term, but it is very damaging in the long run. It diminishes your ability to achieve the next step. – Craig

Examples of Related Insights

- When you are a senior executive part of the role is you are part of the face of the company. Even an elevator ride with another employee is a chance to demonstrate respectful and positive treatment of everyone in the company. - Len
- Even after people have been stifled for years by "command and control", a new leader can "take the cuffs off" by respecting people and their ideas. One of the best ways to show respect for peoples' contributions is to simply show up at events that a busy senior executive might not attend, and take the time to listen. – Justin
- Believe in people and show that you believe in them, and they will deliver great work. Almost everyone has the ability to lead in their own way. It creates a great environment. - Lorraine
- Efforts can be crippled by immature and unethical managers who treated people badly. Teams should be based on mutual respect. - Bev
- Treating people with respect is especially important when working on highly sensitive issues and making tough decisions. Let all voices be heard, and treat everyone as worthy. – Michelle

Common Learning Scenarios

- Negative models caused participants to reject leadership styles they felt were detrimental, and led them to consider a better approach more in line with their own beliefs.
- Positive models tended to be rare individuals who showed a great ability to work with people.
- Extensive personal reflection played a major role in helping participants find their own style. In some cases, this reflection was motivated by feedback from others or by the personal realization that their current style was damaging relationships or intimidating others. This personal reflection was sometimes part of a process of deep personal reassessment and change. It dealt with basic questions about how they saw themselves and other people.
- Working with groups in respectful ways allowed participants to experience the benefits of this type of leadership and confirmed the benefits.

Shared Insight #2: Stand on values and principles

“People who have trouble with the job can’t navigate their way through the chaos very well. They are pulled here, and pulled here, and pulled here to do this and that and the other thing. ...It is about your core values, and sticking to them, and sticking to the purpose. If you can do that, you can navigate your way through some pretty difficult things, and your job is sensible once again.” – Michelle

Central Theme

Strong leaders are rooted in their values and are respected for standing on principles. This is their reference point during challenging times. Without it they are pushed and pulled by the opinions and pressures around them.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Be known for doing the right thing. When a senior leader stands up and takes a risk for people in the organisation, it shows his commitment to those people, and they are more likely to return commitment to the leader. It builds trust and shows that you are not "a political animal" or doing things for the wrong reasons. – David
- Be guided by core values and the purpose of the organisation, especially when making tough decisions that affect the lives of employees, or the quality of service. - Lorraine
- Moral credibility matters. People will make their own decisions about whether you deserve their respect on moral grounds. They will decide if they trust you to be their leader. - Adele
- A strong sense of your values and "who you are" gives a leader a solid foundation. A leader needs to spend a considerable amount of time reflecting on the things that really matter to them. This gives them a solid base, and helps them stay grounded as they deal with the emotional highs and lows, the good times and difficult times, and the other forces that can push and pull on the senior leader. – Michelle
- Leadership needs to be rooted in values. The decisions you regret most often are made when people or situations cause you to drift from core values. – Craig

Examples of Related Insights

- It is important to “take the high road” when others become self-serving, or overly political, or otherwise act for the wrong reasons. - Len, Marshall, Michelle
- Sometimes you need to be willing to challenge more senior people in your organisation on matters of principle. However, you have to do it skillfully and respectfully. – Valerie, Marshall (observed), Michelle, Catherine, Michael (observed)
- Leaders can experience extreme pressure from boards of directors, more senior managers, politicians, employees or interest groups pushing them to do things that they know are not right. These are times when stopping

to think about basic values, and calling on personal courage, are important. – Michelle, Craig

- Senior leaders can make it much easier to follow their principles if they are not too attached to their jobs. There is a freedom and a sense of peace that comes from knowing you can walk away from your position. It makes it easier to act with integrity and to be less fearful. – Catherine, Michelle
- When it is hard to be loyal to people, it can be helpful to step back and reaffirm your loyalty to the fundamental value of the work and the organisation. There is something bigger than the politics and personal agendas. – Michelle

Common Learning Scenarios

- Taking time to periodically reflect on values and principles (either on one's own or as part of a University programme or other structured learning) appeared to be important.
- Pausing to reconnect with basic principles showed that confirming one's basic beliefs helps a leader navigate difficult times.
- Personal experience showed that respectfully speaking up to senior leaders on matters of principle had the effect of boosting one's own credibility.
- Reflecting on times when they and other leaders made bad decisions revealed that it was sometimes due to being swayed to disregard important principles.
- This was a type of learning that was revisited at all levels of leadership. Participants gave examples of how the need to stand on a foundation of values was reinforced over and over again as they were promoted and different dilemmas of ethics and principle were experienced. These situations ranged from how to treat people who were losing their jobs to dealing with board members who had inappropriate motivations.

Shared Insight #3: Serve the organisation, not yourself.

“It’s not your organisation, in most cases. It is loaned to you ...because the people that are in the organisation ..they’re going to survive you. ..You’ll move on, and most of them will still be there. So the question is do you look after the organisation and leave it in better shape when you leave. Is that your primary goal, or is your primary goal just to aggrandize yourself, and then move on when the rest of the people heave a sigh of relief.” – David

Central Theme

Senior leaders need to avoid the trap of becoming arrogant and egotistical. They are there to serve and better the organisation.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- A key step in moving through leadership roles is to come to understand that you are a “steward of the company”. Your decisions and actions need to be made from a company perspective, not a personal perspective, or a group or division perspective. You need to stand back and ask “what is right for the organisation”. – Len
- Don’t do the work for ego. Do it to make a difference. It is not about the leader as an individual. It is about the work of the group. – Justin
- People in senior roles need to think of themselves as stewards of their organisations. They are there to look after the organisation and its people. As stewards, they are there to make things better, to leave the organisation in better shape than when they took their positions. – David

Examples of Related Insights

- It can be challenging to separate how people respond to a position from how they respond to the person in that position. People in senior roles need to develop an awareness of who is in their life because they want to associate with someone powerful or important, and who is actually a committed friend or colleague, who will still be there for you if you lose

that powerful position. Many people respond to the office of the COO or the office of the CEO, and will shift their attention to the new person “within half an hour” if the person in that office is replaced. Some leaders are missed, many are not, and keeping this in mind helps a senior manager avoid a misguided sense of superiority. – Adele, Catherine

- The phrase “I’m the first among equals” is a useful reminder of the notion that leaders have a special role to fill, but are not better than anyone else. - Craig
- Organisations need to be careful that their reward systems are not rewarding greed and ego. If you are using rewards in the wrong ways, you are going to drive people who have big egos and who are greedy to maximize their benefits, and they may cross the line into inappropriate conduct. - Marshall
- One of the attributes of a good leader is the ability to be self-aware, and to not underestimate either their strengths or their weaknesses. It is not too big a step from confidence to arrogance to self-delusion. - Michael
- People are quick to identify leaders who are doing things for the wrong motivations. They do not trust these leaders. One of the important functions of a senior leader is to ensure that the leaders who report to her have the right motivations. – Adele

Common Learning Scenarios

- Much of this learning appeared to come from observing other leaders inside and outside the participant’s organisations. This included leaders covered by the media for self-serving and unethical actions.
- This was an area where participants had done a great deal of reflection and sorting out of deep personal beliefs and values. It was fundamental to how they saw themselves as leaders and as people.
- Books on leadership also appeared to generate reflection on this issue.

Shared Insight #4: Teams are the basis of success

“We are sitting at the table and I said look, I feel really privileged to be here. I hope that I can deal with the issues in the company, and help create a great company. But my future is in your hands. You can make me look great, or you can make me fail tomorrow. It’s what you decide to do.” - Marshall (Recalled from his first meeting as CEO with his new executive team.)

Central Theme

A leader’s success is determined by his/her team. Smart leaders focus on building and facilitating great teams.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- You need a great team. Teams need people who share your priorities, but offer diversity. They need to have both high-level talent and emotional intelligence. - Bev
- Establishing a strong team oriented culture is vital. People achieve the best results and get through difficult times when they support each other. – Justin
- Your team will determine if you succeed. Your job is to help them succeed by building trust and collegiality, giving them hope and shared goals and values, and encouraging them to solve problems and figure out “how to get there”. Support and encourage their initiative. – Marshall
- Trust your team. Treat them as partners. Team members, not the leader, have to be on top of the important details required for high quality service delivery. Almost everyone has the ability to bring their personal leadership to the task at hand. – Lorraine

Examples of Related insights

- When a team works well, it is better than any individual. It creates a true collaboration in which people ‘play above their heads’ like a sports team that exceeds everyone’s expectations. For the leader, that can make the experience of being a team leader extremely motivating. - Michelle
- It is important to learn how to lead both small and large teams as your scope of leadership enlarges. Large teams are exciting because you influence a large group, that in turn touches a larger group that can change an organisation. This requires learning to communicate through large networks of people. Small teams can move faster, and are better suited to tasks like developing new strategy. – Valerie
- The leader’s job is to create the conditions under which the team can excel. Give people support, guidance and assistance, but step out of their way once you make sure they have the conditions for success. - Craig
- Working through a tough time or a difficult challenge can cause a team to come together with a higher level of trust. – Valerie

Common Learning Scenarios

- Most of this learning came from experience and observation. Participants had been on effective teams and dysfunctional teams. They had seen leaders create great teams, and they had seen leaders who believed too much in themselves as individuals, or who had ways of dealing with people that damaged teamwork.

Shared Insight #5: Leaders create solutions

“You know they talk about out of the box type things. ...You know, I wasn’t an engineer ...but I would learn all the engineering I needed to learn. I would learn all the accounting I needed to learn, and I could always bring creative solutions that were different than what they could depend on from anybody else, so they wanted that. ...They always put me on projects that required that.” Catherine

Central Theme

Good leaders bring value by finding the solutions and strategies their organisation needs. They are often good problem solvers as individuals, but they learn to build teams and organisations that support and encourage innovative solutions.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Continuously scan the environment. Be deliberately aware of things that could go wrong in your organisation. Look for problems before they happen. When there is a problem rooted in a systemic issue, don't look to blame someone. Look to solve the systemic issue. – David
- You can add value and build personal credibility by showing personal leadership and proactively looking for solutions. – Bev
- Take initiative as a problem solver. This includes seeing how to define the problem, taking initiative (often without being asked), being sensitive to the people involved, and being able to engage those people so that they support the solution. – Marshall
- Being able to come up with effective and creative solutions helps you bring an unusual level of value to your organisation. – Catherine
- One of the defining characteristics of people who stand out as either informal or formal leaders is their ability to bring new solutions and directions to their organisation. Originally they may do this on an individual basis as they solve problems and find better ways of doing things. Later they learn to engage teams in this process. – Michael

Examples of Related Insights

- There can be advantages to not waiting to be asked to solve a problem. The risk is that someone will "slap your knuckles" for going beyond the scope of your job. - Bev, Michael (observed), Catherine, Marshall (observed)
- You get the best solutions when you take people out of their comfort zone. When an issue is significant, it can be important to not accept a purely

comfortable solution. It might be technically correct, but it will not be creative, and many challenges require being adaptive and innovative. - Bev

- When encouraging others to take initiative and find solutions, it is important that they trust their leader to support their attempts even if they don't work out. People will not try if the culture does not support innovation and they are likely to be criticized. – Marshall, Bev
- Solutions often come from the people closest to the problem. Managers need to listen to people at all levels in their organisations, and being open to solutions they propose. – David

Common Learning Scenarios

- The leaders who discussed this area of learning appeared to have a natural inclination as problem solvers. In their earliest jobs they built their credibility by taking on problems and creating solutions. Experience simply allow them to get better at creating solutions, and gradually they learn to do it through teams, rather than doing it all themselves.
- Participants did not appear to use formal problem solving models as taught in university or in other courses. They may have borrowed elements of such models, but they relied heavily on honing their own approaches. A key element was that their early initiative was rewarded.
- Participants often took on progressively more difficult problems as others recognized their abilities. Some were given major projects and challenges very early on. This led to “stretching” abilities and rapidly developing confidence.

Shared Insight #6: Seek ideas and knowledge beyond your own

“I think that one of the things that defines a geek is love of knowledge in a certain area ...what defines those people is a burning desire to know about things in that area. So my ‘geekism’ is actually pretty broad. I’m a technology geek for sure, but I’m also a human nature geek, I’m a business geek. I want to know things about business. The MBA was really just an extension of my being a geek.” – Michael

Central Theme

Skilled leaders aggressively pursue learning, and extend the knowledge that is available to them by tapping into expertise inside and outside their organisations. They build networks of people who have diverse perspectives and areas of knowledge they do not have.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Success can be aided by tapping into the right people inside and outside of your organisation. Learn to draw on the intelligence and experience of people from many walks of life. – Bev
- Seek other people's insights. Everyone who works for you knows more about something than you do. Having a strong network of relationships with people who are capable in many areas is a huge resource. This includes people in your immediate team, elsewhere in the organisation, and outside of the organisation. The key is to be open to the idea that you can make better decisions with input from people whose experience and knowledge goes beyond your own. – Marshall
- Any expert has a lot to contribute and a lot to learn. Increasingly, contemporary problems require a mix of perspectives and professional backgrounds. The key is to learn how to elicit the strengths of a group of individuals with varied experiences. – Valerie

Examples of Related Insights

- When leading teams of people who know more than you do in technical areas, learn enough to know basically how things work and to challenge the business, financial or technical assumptions that underlie their analysis. This is an excellent way to ensure that they haven't missed something important to the ultimate decision. - Len
- You can't have diversity of thinking and creative solutions if you only associate people who are like you. Spend time with people you would not normally spend time with, including people you meet in the community, and through volunteer roles. They open up your thinking. – Marshall

- If you don't get out and talk to people like your customers, your technical specialists, and other leaders in different areas of the company, your plans and decisions will lack important insights or will be blocked by others for a variety of reasons. – Michael
- It can be extremely useful to tap into the knowledge of experts who have no vested interest in what you are doing. They begin with a clean slate, and see things that those who are wrapped up the issue may not see. – Adele

Common Learning Scenarios

- Many of the participants appeared to be naturally curious people, but different types of experiences led them to learn to be deliberate about how they sought out information. Over time, they learned that different types of people could contribute to their planning and decision-making and help them avoid mistakes. Those who sought innovation and creative thinking learned through experience that it was important to access people with very different points of view.
- Observation of leaders who did not seek out information, and who believed too much in their own expertise, demonstrated the risks of not being open to the views of others.

Shared Insight #7: Acquire broad understanding of your field or business

“I’ve often said the best training ground for a president at any level would be to president of a small university for half a dozen years because you are involved in everything. You are doing it all yourself. ...I was everything. I was basically chief financial officer, chief human rights officer ...There were so few of us that I got a chance to do everything. ...So I had a tremendous opportunity.” - Craig

Central Theme

Leaders are better prepared for the wide ranging discussion and decision making that happens at the executive level if they have a broad base of experience related to the organisation and its operating context.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Success in senior leadership requires continuous, broad based learning. Important areas for learning include: expanded understanding of the organisation and the field (not staying in a narrow area), administration and leadership. - Lorraine
- Develop a broad understanding of the business. Stepping out of technical roles such as engineering, and moving into positions that provide exposure to many different aspects of the business, helps prepare people for the wide ranging business discussions that occur at the executive level. A senior leader needs to be able to contribute to discussions concerning finance, business strategy, personnel, mergers and acquisitions, corporate responsibility, etc. - Marshall
- Taking on a role which is outside of your normal skill area can help to significantly broaden your learning, especially when it exposes you to a broader view of the business. – Len

Examples of Related Insights

- Senior leaders often need to broaden their perspective to where they are in touch with national and international trends. They need to be thinking about much more than the work that comes into their "inbox". – Justin
- Having front-line experience is helpful, but it isn't enough if you don't stay in touch with the issues that are relevant to the people on the front lines today. Saying things like "back in my day" actually shows that you have become irrelevant. Senior leaders need to constantly show their relevance. Otherwise they are just "placeholders". – David

- National and international experience in quite different environments and cultures can remind you of what you take for granted, and reaffirm the things you value. – Adele

Common Learning Scenarios

- During their careers participants could see that accumulating different types of experiences and training/education would prepare them for activities outside of their professional roles. For example, an engineer saw the need to learn about the financial side of the business, and mergers and acquisitions. A number of participants had pursued graduate degrees that took them outside of their strict professional field (5 had Masters degrees in business and/or administration). Overall, they became aware of the value of broadening their experience and knowledge base and took initiative to make it happen.
- Getting to the executive level and seeing how their experience helped them to deal with the wide ranging issues commonly discussed by senior leaders confirmed the value of broad based learning.
- This type of learning was often associated with risk taking, i.e. being willing to move into areas of the organisation where the person did not have strong expertise, or being willing to move to a new organisation entirely to get a different type of experience. This led to a greater sense of being able to learn and adapt, and succeed even when you do not have as much knowledge as others.

Shared Insight #8: Focus on the core issues that really matters

“I am able to pull together very disparate thoughts, and kind of quickly pull them up to find the essence of it. And maybe it is that ability to deal with chaos and complexity and bring it up to - what are the elements that matter, that allows me to deal with messy situations like start-ups. ...You are able to connect the dots on it.” - Bev

Central Theme

A critical function of the leader is focusing people on the challenges and tasks that really matter to the organisation's performance and future. It can be what matters in a specific project, or problem or business deal, or it can be what matters to the whole future of the enterprise.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Focus on the first principles, the defining principles that explain what really matters in any situation. – Catherine
- Senior leaders need to see the big picture, including the factors that are shaping the future and calling for changes in strategy. – Michael
- It is important to be able to analyze complex situations and see the core drivers and principles that should guide your decisions and plans. – Michael
- Get the big principles right. Focus on what really matters. It is easy to gather large amounts of information, and crunch the numbers in many ways with the aim of finding the right answer to a business decision. Often, however, the key is to find the underlying principles that will make the strategy, deal or decision either good or bad. It is a matter of finding what really matters, and not being distracted by the endless details or protracted attempts to make the analysis precise. – Marshall
- You have to be able to think strategically and see the few critical elements. You have to move up a level, and see the interconnectivity of things that actually makes the complex more simple. To engage others on these big issues, it has to be made simple through their eyes. – Bev

Examples of Related Insights

- It is not a matter of telling everyone what to do. You have to mobilize the collective wisdom, and get everyone focused on the things that matter most. – Bev
- Sometimes the best way to determine what really matters is to go back to basic values and principles. When you know why you are doing something,

what matters becomes clear. – Lorraine, Michelle, Len

Common Learning Scenarios

- *This was a skill that was honed through experience as participants learned to deal with increasingly difficult problems and opportunities.*
- Some mentioned particularly astute leaders who taught them how to cut through to core issues.
- Others discussed managers who provided poor models due to their tendency to waste time and energy analyzing issues from many angles hoping to find an answer when they did not understand how a decision should be made.

Shared Insight #9: Deliver and expect quality

“I think quality is important. ...If people can’t make a decision about the quality required on simple things, you really wonder if they can make decisions about the quality required on really important things. It is just something you watch. ...you only have to hold people to a standard once or twice, and the quality improves dramatically.” – Marshall

Central Theme

Leaders model high standards in personal work and have high expectations of others.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- When people see a supervisor making the effort to work hard, do quality work and support his team, it shows his commitment through his actions, and motivates others to be committed as well. – David
- Set high-quality standards for your work. Good people who do good work are recognized. Good work is forward thinking, and is based on knowing your audience. It is done in a context that makes it very useful to your

executive, board, etc. You focus on the questions that really matter, and what is really needed and not needed. – Len

- Demonstrate quality in what you do, and whenever quality is important, expect it from others. If someone doesn't deliver needed quality on small things, it suggests that may not be trustworthy when it comes to delivering quality on larger projects where it really counts. – Marshall
- Model high personal standards for your work, and expect others to do the same. – Lorraine
- It is important for a leader to demonstrate a work ethic and a sense of quality. The people in an organisation who work hard need to see that their leader works hard too and set the bar high. – Michelle

Examples of Related Insights

- The quality of a person's writing is important. It reflects on who they are as a professional or a manager, and if it goes outside of the organisation, it even reflects on the quality of the organisation itself. – Michael
- The idea of quality connects to a drive for improvement. Part of seeking quality is looking for better ways to do things, and not being content with the status quo. – Justin
- You won't have credibility as a more senior leader, if you didn't do quality work in your previous role. The reputation you have for the standard of your work follows you. – David

Common Learning Scenarios

- A key factor appeared to be learning to live up to standards of leaders or mentors with whom they worked. For example, a number of people mentioned learning how to prepare presentations and documents to a standard that would impress their superiors.

Shared Insight #10: Work at understanding others

“I have always had a curiosity about people. You know, what makes people chose a profession, what makes people not tell the truth in front of a leader, what makes people afraid ...I think you have to have kind of five parts of your brain going at one time when you are in charge of something. You have to have the part of your brain that is doing the conceptual piece and saying is this the right answer. ...Then you have to have sort of that intuition or instinct that everybody is telling you the truth, that you are getting all of the information and they’re not holding anything back. Then you have to have another part of your brain watching the body language between the participants. Who’s eyeing who? Who’s snarling at who? ...I also have a part of my brain going how’s that person going to react to that. That’s just part of being curious about people. What makes them tick?” – Catherine

Central Theme

Skilled leaders seek to understand other people’s needs, motivations and priorities.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Listening is the foundation of working with people. Sincerely wanting to hear what others have to say is vital to good leadership. – David
- When people feel strongly that something is affecting them, it is important to show that everyone is worthy, and that their voices deserve to be heard. The leader may still have to make tough or unpopular decisions, but listening allows people to feel respected. – Michelle
- People learn, motivate and get satisfaction in different ways. This is the result of factors like culture, differences in the way they think, and different life experiences. To work effectively as a leader, it is important to step away from your own view of such things, and work to understand others. – Craig
- Leadership requires you to be an extraordinary observer of what is going on around you. This can allow you to pick up on how people are reacting to

challenges and projects. This in turn allows you to adjust your style and intervene when necessary. – Catherine

- It is important to recognize that different people will respond better to different management styles. For example, some need lots of freedom, and others need more support and guidance. – Michael

Examples of Related Insights

- Awareness of how your own behaviour is impacting others can alert you to situations where your natural or habitual style isn't working. For some people this can lead to a career turning point in which they stop and reflect and take their leadership style in a new direction. – Michael, Catherine
- Understanding other peoples' motivations can be particularly useful when there is work to be done that is hard or unpleasant. It helps you to find a way to get them through the tough times. – Len
- Don't assume that everyone is like you. People from different cultures, and in different lines of work may have quite different motivations. - Craig

Common Learning Scenarios

- Some participants had "eye opening" experiences in which they realized that they did not understand how to work with other people and were impacting them adversely. They had to deliberately commit to paying attention to other peoples' needs and their ways of working and communicating. This sometimes meant that participants had to make major changes in their approach to working with others.
- Being exposed to people from different cultures (e.g. in Canada's far north, internationally, new immigrants) and people who do different types of work (e.g. field workers, trades people, cleaning staff) led to understanding that people can have very different perspectives.

Shared Insight #11: Cultivate influence

“If you are going to take the organisation in a different way, they’re not going to do it because you say they’re going to do it. They have to believe it makes sense ...So to stand up and go well I’m just the smartest guy in the world because I’m at the top, that makes me the smartest guy in the world, so everybody must think I’m the smartest guy in the world, so here’s where we’re going and you guys might as well follow me. Then really what happens - how many people just follow because of fear of losing their jobs, ...or follow because we’ll put up with this person for as long as he’s here because there is a life span. As opposed to what makes really good sense. I believe in where we’re going.” – David

Central Theme

Most of a leader’s ability to get things done comes through their influence, the degree to which they are respected, and the processes they use to engage others, not through position power.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Senior positions have less position power than people imagine, and it is a mistake to try and rely on position power to motivate people to get things done. Cultivating your ability to influence others is much more important. – Michelle
- Power is most effective when it comes from influence, not position. – Craig
- Facilitation, relationship building and influence allow you to be an informal leader and get things done even when you're not at the head of the room. – Adele
- Informal leadership can be very powerful. One of the key roles of the effective informal leader is asking questions that get people thinking without causing them to feel criticized. – Valerie
- A great deal of leadership influence can be achieved through how you involve a team in discussion and planning. This can be done even when you do not have a formal management position. Engaging people in the

discussion of new directions increases their commitment to action. –
Michael

Examples of Related Insights

- It is easy to underestimate how people can resist when they do not respect a manager or do not agree with their direction. People will find ways to keep doing what they have always done, or to do what they think should be done. – Craig, David
- A great deal of influence is built one-on-one. People get to know you in private conversations, and get to trust your agenda. Taking the time to foster key relationships can be the difference between whether people support or resist something you are proposing. – Bev

Common Learning Scenarios

- This appeared to be long term learning based on observing their personal reactions and the reactions of others to leaders who gave directions they did not support.
- Participants had also learned through experience that they and others got a great deal done through building relationships and exerting informal leadership.
- It was also common for participants to discover that when they reached top positions that others saw as powerful, they actually had much less power than people would assume. They still had to rely on being respected and on building their capacity to influence others. They were very aware that they could be ignored when people in their large organisations were carrying out their jobs.

Shared Insight #12: Match jobs and people by looking for an alignment of passion, values and skills

“We have to play far more to people’s strengths, for lack of a better term, what turns them on in their workplace, and try and feed and water that. ...We try and force fit people into roles instead of growing their strengths. When I get asked for advice, I try to really go back and find - what makes you feel good ...where do you have the most to give, what makes you happiest. If you are doing something that you are skilled at, that fills up your tank, you will do that consistently well. ...It’s the formula for success in my mind.” - Lorraine

Central Theme

People thrive in jobs that are a good fit for their skills, and where their values and passions align with those of their leaders.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Work for organisations where you feel aligned with the values and the key people. Without this alignment you will either leave or experience great stress. – Marshall
- Choose jobs that are a good fit for you, and help other people find jobs that are good fit for them. You need to be clear and self-confident about where you intend to make an impact and why. Provided you have the skills and competence others will pave the way. – Valerie
- Happy employees do good work. Leaders need to focus on the quality of the employee experience if they want to impact the quality of the organisation’s output. It is also about fit. Having people in roles that make the most of their strengths, give them meaning, and makes them happy. – Lorraine

Examples of Related Insights

- A person is energized when they feel in sync with the team around them, and feel that they are committed to the same values and directions. – Len

- If you are naturally inclined towards innovation and improvement, and your organisation is slow moving and resistant to change, you will eventually leave. – Valerie
- When highly competent professionals like doctors and nurses are given management roles it may or may not work out. It will depend a lot on whether their passions and skills fit the demands of management. If they don't, it is better for them to enjoy life in a professional role, rather than struggle trying to be a manager. - Lorraine
- Clashes can occur when organisations merge, and people can lose their sense of alignment. For example, if an organisation known for a progressive people oriented management style is taken over by a command and control management team, there will be conflict and hardship and talented people leave. – Michael

Common Learning Scenarios

- Much of this learning appeared to come from first-hand experience with participants finding themselves in positions at various times in their careers where they either did not like the work they were doing, or felt in conflict with the values and directions of their managers. In some situations, this led participants to experience a great deal of stress or dissatisfaction, before moving on to a role where they found the alignment they needed to be happy.
- Another important source of learning was watching other friends and colleagues struggle in positions when there was not a good fit for their skills, passions or values.

Shared Insight #13: Be willing to reveal what you care about and how you think

“There’s got to be a piece where people decide if you are authentic. ...They will know why I believe what I believe because I will talk about what I believe. I will also talk about where I come from, what my perspectives are.” – Adele

Central Theme

It is important for leaders to show their human side. Employees want to know something about the person, and to see that this person cares about things they care about. Letting people see how you think helps them align with you, and support you.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Leadership needs a human side and a human face. Deliberately shape a respectful culture, and allow people to see the boss as a human being too.
– Justin
- It is important to be empathic, and not be afraid to show your softer side.
– Michelle
- You can combine strength and resolve with compassion and empathy. – Valerie
- Leaders should take the time to let their people "get inside their head". This can be done by being transparent about your thinking. As you discuss things openly, people get a sense of what matters to you, and how you are thinking about the topic at hand. This provides important context for them. – Valerie

Examples of Related Insights

- When you work around managers who are not worthy of respect, you see this principle work in the opposite way, i.e. people turn against them when they reveal their lack of values and integrity. – Michelle (observed), Michael (observed), Marshall (observed).
- Revealing how you think can take the form of thinking out loud. Letting your team see the ideas or problems you are struggling with makes them aware of your perspectives, and helps them understand the your perspectives and how they can help you. – Valerie

Common Learning Scenarios

- Positive mentors played a key role by demonstrating this type of leadership.
- Participants also appeared to discover this by taking risks and being somewhat vulnerable. They saw that it seemed to have a positive impact when they shared their values and emotions openly, or were willing to “think out loud” and let others help them resolve issues.

Shared Insight #14: Encourage provocative debate

“For me, that's the strength of teams. The people have different knowledge, different experience. They think about issues in different ways.... We could have some donnybrooks some days, like people would see things really differently, but it wasn't about personal issues, it was about finding the right solutions. So we could have really tough discussion for an hour or two, and go to lunch and everybody would be happy because there was no personal attack in challenging concepts around what we should do.” – Marshall

Central Theme

Encouraging challenging and provocative discussion brings out the best ideas and best solutions.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Giving people input and respecting their ideas and involvement achieves things that “command and control” cannot achieve. Encourage speaking up. – Justin
- If you want to be a leader, you have to be confident and understand what you know and what you don't know. Even if you know things, be prepared to embrace criticism, new ideas, and the input of “smart people”. Challenging discussion and even conflict are important to getting to the best solutions. – Adele

- Encourage provocative questions and discussions in your team and throughout the organisation. Exposure to people with different backgrounds and perspectives is critical to the process of finding good solutions. Support and encourage initiative and "having a voice". Build an environment where people feel safe questioning the status quo, and putting their ideas on the table. Cultivate improvement and game changing new solutions. Don't stifle innovation by cost cutting and punishing people for making mistakes. – Marshall

Examples of Related Insights

- To some degree, people will naturally be afraid of senior leaders, and this can interfere with creating an open environment in which people are comfortable expressing their ideas. The comfort can be increased when the leader has a sense of humour, or shows concern for people's families, or genuinely shows respect to everyone with whom they work. – Catherine
- When the position of the leader is known too early it can stifle debate. - Adele
- When there is fundamental conflict it means that people are exploring what really matters - Adele
- It is very important to challenge the assumptions that people are using to make business decisions. – Len
- An inclination to ask questions is an important attribute for a leader. It helps you learn, and it is also important to challenging the status quo and making things better. – Valerie
- Being provocative and challenging the prevailing thinking is essential to creating innovation and continuous improvement. – Bev

Common Learning Scenarios

- An important part of this learning came from working for managers who stifled challenging questions and input. Participants were often independent thinkers early in their own careers, and they did not like

being suppressed. They also saw how these leaders negatively impacted morale and innovation.

- Experience in teams that were comfortable with challenging conversation confirmed the benefits. Leaders saw how great solutions could be found without the leader having to know all the answers.

Shared Insight #15: Learn to handle aggressive and challenging personalities

“Quite often you find that people are promoted and are senior leaders because they have very strong personalities ...very strong will. Often I think that can be intimidating, even if they don’t mean it necessarily to be intimidating. They are very strong, very intelligent people, with very strong personalities, and with a real sense of how they were successful, or how they got to where they are. When you challenge that, you are absolutely doing a gut check at that point. You’re figuring out am I prepared to take this risk with this person given the strength of their personality, and given the political nuances around the job situation.” - Justin

Central Theme

As you move up in an organisation, it is important to become comfortable working with senior leaders who have aggressive or challenging styles.

Examples of Individual Perceptions on the Central Theme

- Confidence in dealing with forceful personalities allows you to be more comfortable and credible at senior leadership levels. You need to find a way to work with such people in a relationship of mutual respect and trust. Otherwise, it can be very stressful. – Justin
- Dealing with difficult people can toughen you up, and help you learn how to manage challenging relationships. – Bev
- Dealing with influential people who lack integrity can be a stressful part of the senior leader’s role. It is important to maintain your own values and standards and not get caught up in their way of doing things. – Michelle

- The ability to speak up in thoughtful and challenging discussions, without being intimidated by the presence of more senior people, can build your credibility as long as you learn to express your ideas in a way that is well received given the participants and the situation. – Catherine
- It is important to be able to deal with strong personalities in senior positions who may be difficult or aggressive. This includes inappropriate alpha males. Sometimes it is a matter of being a calm influence. Other times, it is necessary to demand appropriate workplace conduct. – Catherine

Examples of Related Insights

- The behaviour of difficult leaders can range from inconsiderate bad habits to yelling, rudeness and belittling or verbally attacking people in front of their peers. – Nine of the participants gave examples of such leaders.
- Learning to work with aggressive and difficult leaders comes from finding ways to successfully speak up to them and get them to deal with you in a respectful way. – Catherine, Bev, Marshall, Justin (all observed)
- Deal with senior people as equals. Do not stress about their reactions. They may or may not like your input, but that's okay. – Lorraine

Common Learning Scenarios

- Learning to deal with these types of senior leaders appears to be a trial and error process that involves risk and stress. Some participants could remember specific conversations from years ago in which they succeeded in getting such a person to begin treating them differently. Many participants appeared to see it as a reality of working near the top of certain large organisations.
- Successfully managing relationships with difficult leaders is part of a larger learning process that leads to greater confidence, and a sense of being able to deal with “anyone”.

Shared Insight #16: Take care of yourself when challenges at work and at home create pressures

“There were times when my personal life was going through its biggest crisis and I was also going through some major changes in my professional life too, and that was really hard. In fact I kind of came through it ...and was impacted by it. Yah, that was hard. ...You can’t take your personal life out of it. And so what was hard for me at the time was just trying to do everything and just cope. And it wasn’t day to day. Sometimes it was minute to minute.” – Len

Central Theme

There is sometimes serious emotional hardship associated with leadership that can be compounded by personal or family problems.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Career challenges can combine with personal challenges to put leaders under extreme stress. You can’t ignore your own needs, or the big picture of your life. – Bev
- The combination of personal life challenges and professional challenges can mean that there are times in a leadership career when it is hard to cope. Going through some of this yourself helps you learn to understand other people’s circumstances. – Len
- If you go into a senior management role, know that it will make serious demands on your energy. You will often feel challenged and sometimes feel “beaten up” by the experience. – Justin

Examples of Related Insights

- A major source of emotional hardship can be trying to balance a very demanding career with a strong need to be a good parent – Len (observed), Bev (observed), Catherine

- The pressure on leaders can be so great that they seriously consider abandoning their leadership roles in order to gain a sense of personal and family wellbeing – Justin (observed), Bev (observed), Catherine
- Emotional hardship can be associated with learning to manage one's workload and delegate effectively as the scope of responsibility widens. As leaders gain increasing responsibility they have to develop the ability to share the load or they may collapse under the pressure. – Catherine, Bev
- Managing the emotional pressures of senior leadership is greatly aided by the support of an understanding spouse who is willing to help with the family workload and make adjustments in their own career. – Adele, Catherine

Common Learning Scenarios

- Ten of the participants discussed times as senior leaders that they saw as being very difficult and stressful. These were associated with a variety of situations including major projects, mergers, major promotions, dramatic expansion of responsibility, organisation crises, and conflicts with superiors. In some cases, these difficult times were complicated by personal or family illness, single parenthood, aging parents, or separation and divorce. To a large degree the learning came from simply surviving and managing the experience. Team members, mentors and confidants played a role in helping some participants.
- A key element in the learning for a number of participants was a reframing of their responsibilities, with an emphasis on doing less themselves and delegating more.
- These difficult times provoked a great deal of introspection around personal suitability for leadership, value conflicts (e.g. family/work, fit with organisational culture), and sources of happiness.

Shared Insight #17: Leading change is difficult and complex

“That’s one of the reasons I think it takes so long. It has to be relentless. It has to be ongoing. It has to be in everything you do. And I think that most people need to see that consistency long enough and consistently enough that they start to believe themselves that it is an expectation for their own behaviour. – Michael
(Discussing the challenge of deliberately creating a cultural shift in an organisation.)

Central Theme

Organisational change is a primary challenge for leaders. It is difficult and complex, and often harder than anticipated.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Leadership is important when change is required. Change scares people, and the leader's role is to help them understand that it is possible. In times of change, it is helpful if the leader clearly communicates their position, and creates a process and a structure to support the change. People involved in the change also need to feel that their input is respected, and that they understand how the new structure and direction will work. - Adele
- Introducing change requires a thoughtful approach focused on ultimate objectives. It helps to be enthusiastic about the challenge, and to feel “revved up” about the challenge inherent in the uncertainty of how things will turn out. – Bev
- Introducing change in an organisation requires tuning into the human dynamics. It means understanding when people are likely to embrace certain changes, and achieving the right balance between being firm on the principles but considerate of the people. Change models that are too tactical are not well suited to complex people oriented organisations. – Michelle

- People and organisations are biological and organic in nature. Trying to force people into mechanistic models and approaches is a mistake. – Catherine
- Achieving a major cultural change, such as the integration of employees from different corporate cultures, is a difficult and slow process. It has to be approached slowly and deliberately with a deep understanding of the opinions and attitudes of all key groups. – Michael

Examples of Additional Insights

- Some organisations have cultures that are slow moving and risk averse. This can make it very difficult to effect change, and can ultimately drive out progressive employees. – Valerie
- Change needs to be reasonably paced for the organisation. Involve and engage people in determining the path of change. – Craig

Common Learning Scenarios

- Most of the learning related to change came from being directly involved in change initiatives. It was hands on learning in which participants directly saw the difficulties.
- Some participants had also read about, or been trained in, change management processes.

Shared Insight #18: Build trust in all of your relationships

“When you are put in positions of trust, you try to make sure that people are convinced that that trust was well placed. Your bosses would say that they hired you to do a job, you did the job and their trust in you was well placed. That kind of speaks to your reputation, and that means a lot to me. ...it’s all about trust, and relationships – forming a relationship where people can say that guy is a go to guy, I can ‘give the keys to the store’ to this guy and I know things will be OK. He’s going to look after my welfare.” – Justin

Central Theme

It is vital to be trusted by those above you, and to have the trust of those who work for you. When you lose trust, it is very hard to regain.

Examples of Individual Perspectives on the Central Theme

- Being trusted is paramount. You need the people above you to see you as entirely dependable. They should never have to worry about your commitment or whether they can trust you to act with integrity. Being trusted brings freedom, and means that your leaders are likely to support you when you need to take a risk. This is vital for leaders because they do need to take risks and know that they will continue to be supported by those above them even when things do not work out. – Justin
- Trust is critical in an effective organisation. People have to know that they are going to be supported if they did something for the right reasons. If you don't have trust, you don't have loyalty, and you don't have innovation. – Marshall
- You never lose when you take the high road. If you don't nobody will trust you. It helps you create followers. If you can't be on the high road, don't expect your people to be. – Craig
- Moral credibility matters. People will make their own decisions about whether you deserve their respect on moral grounds. They will decide if they trust you to be their leader. – Adele
- Other people have confidence in leaders when they trust them and see that the directions the leader takes actually work out. It is not a given, you have to earn that trust, and earn it again as you move into higher positions. You prove you are smart by showing people that you are smart. You don't do it by telling them that you are smart. Your leadership will be proven by what you do. – Adele

Examples of Related Insights

- Keep the organisation safe by choosing key advisors and team members you can trust. Learn to trust your gut, but also check people out. – Lorraine

- Senior leaders have to be trusted, but they also have to trust their teams. They are the people the leader must rely on to get the work done and keep the quality high. – Lorraine
- Being trusted is influenced by your style of working, i.e. showing confidence, having an intelligent understanding of issues, and being a convincing communicator.
- Treat all of the people you work with as someone you will be linked to for the rest of your life. – Craig
- A lack of honesty displayed by a leader in one situation can weaken your ability to trust that individual on other issues. – Valerie
- A track record of listening and building trust leads to the leader being supported when they need to make a decision that may not be supported by everyone. – Valerie

Common Learning Scenarios

- Other leaders provided positive and negative models related to trust. Models included people participants knew directly, and leaders in the news.

The Full Range of Issues Discussed

In addition to the 18 areas of insight shared by 7 or more participants, there were many topics discussed by fewer numbers, including points made by only one or two people. These topics are listed below to give a complete picture of the many areas of learning participants identified, and to put the 18 common points in context.

- Supporting initiative and risk taking
- Self-awareness – monitoring your behaviour and impact
- Talent development, developing leaders
- Accountability
- Leading with a vision, strategy and targets
- Selecting great people and giving them space to work
- Adapting leadership to different types of people

- Not all professionals are suited to leadership
- The transition into leadership
- Benefits of community investment
- Getting employees engaged
- How large organisations waste time and energy
- Being respected versus being liked
- Transitioning into higher roles
- The collection of leaders at the top of a large organisation
- Issues related to working with small and large teams
- The attributes of good leaders
- The leader's need to get results
- Focus on improvement
- Leading through difficult times
- Creating conditions for success
- Decision making
- Being relevant to people in your organisation
- Strategy development
- Personal time and energy management
- Dealing with performance problems
- Leadership related stress
- Letting others own the direction and take the credit
- The leader's role as a communicator
- Getting work done through others
- Special challenges for women
- Overcoming fears and having courage
- How leadership roles can be life changing
- Managing your identity and image

Important Leadership Skills

When participants were asked about their practical skill set, and the concrete skills that help them succeed in their executive role, six types of skill were mentioned most frequently. This was done without prompting. The number of participants identifying each skill is included in parentheses. (n=12)

1. Listening and discussing – The ability to tune into other people, engage them in conversation, and draw out their ideas. (12)
2. Public speaking – The ability to speak to large and small groups convincingly, while representing themselves and their organisation well. (11)
3. Thinking strategically – Being able to see the big picture and explore issues important to the future. (7)
4. Problem solving – The ability to ask the right questions, see the types of solutions that are needed, and then find creative options. (5)
5. Learning efficiently – Moving from challenge to challenge and quickly getting on top of the issues so that you can ask good questions, determine who to trust, and make decisions. (5)
6. Writing well – The ability to convey ideas in written form including e-mails, reports, communication to employees, etc. (4)

Participants described a number of these skills (e.g. listening, thinking strategically, problem solving, learning, writing) as abilities they were naturally good or had gradually developed over time. Mentions of any specific training, books or models were extremely rare. The exception was the skill of public speaking where many of the leaders had training.

The remaining skills that were identified between 1 and 3 times each were very diverse. They included: working with a collaborative style (3), being able to discuss front line and technical issues (3), managing meetings (2), knowing when to avoid a battle to win the war (2), tackling difficult issues and having courage (2), coaching employees (2), handling stressful situations (2), delivering quality (2), and making good investment/economic decisions (2). All other skills were only mentioned once.

Common Themes

Looking at both the most common and less common insights, and at the frequently mentioned skills, participants appeared to concentrate on a relatively small number of broad leadership topics. A primary focus was a leader's interactions and communication with other employees. This included treating employees with respect, working at understanding others, and the skills of listening/discussing and public speaking. A second focus was the importance of principled leadership, and the need to be anchored by core values. A third focus was on bringing organisations solutions and results through such things as astute problem solving, strategic thinking and teamwork. A fourth focus was a leader's need to be open to learning, debate and new ideas. And finally, there was recognition of the need for leaders to attend to their own wellbeing with discussion of such things as stress, handling aggressive people, and the combined impact of pressures at home and at work.

Part 2: Categories of Learning Experiences

It had been observed during the interviews, and the process of documenting the interviews, that the events and experiences the participants associated with their developing insight and understanding appeared to fall into categories. To identify those categories, the interview documentation was reviewed in detail to assign the many events and experiences to meaningful clusters that fit with the characteristics of the experiences noted by the participants. This was accomplished by trying categories that seemed to reflect the basic qualities of the situations until the vast majority of the learning events and experiences were coded into nine categories. Some events and experiences fit more than one category, if they included two or three of the elements that appeared essential to the learning.

The identified categories were as follows.

1. **Self-initiated learning** – Actions undertaken without being asked or directed.
The participants were a group of people who were keen to learn and to try new things. They tended to question the status quo and solve problems without being asked. They built networks of knowledgeable people. They sought out advanced training and education, and a number of them arranged experiences that deliberately broadened their base of understanding through international work, volunteering, and secondments or new jobs in different organisations. A number were avid readers of books that influenced their world view and view of leadership. As previously mentioned, this initiative was central to their approach to problem solving, but it also appeared to provide a wide base of learning that shaped their leadership.
2. **Positive challenges** – Experience that stretched abilities while being generally enjoyable.
Participants frequently spoke of great opportunities that allowed them to take on more demanding projects and roles. Often their learning about leadership was imbedded in these kinds of experiences as they worked with new mentors, supervised new teams and learned to work with employees with different backgrounds. It is, however, important to note

that the careers of these leaders were typically one challenge after another. They often moved from a purely professional role to a supervisory role or a position of influence while quite young, and then experienced a succession of challenging projects and/or promotions as their abilities were recognized. They gained the confidence they would need for the executive level by learning that they could handle greater and greater demands.

3. **Negative challenges** – Experience that stretched abilities while being unpleasant and stressful.

Difficult times were also central to gaining confidence and expanding each participant's understanding of what they could accomplish. These also appeared to be times when learning about values, trust, teamwork and relationships was at the forefront. It is important to note that these negative challenges a) often had a dimension of conflict or difficult relationships, and b) often included levels of responsibility that those who remain in professional roles do not experience. These negative challenges included such things as major projects with high profile and high risk, long periods of extreme pressure, circumstances that put jobs at risk or threatened the viability of the organisation, and leadership conflicts related to being acquired by another company or working for weak or abrasive senior leaders. In a number of cases, participants described times of exhaustion, health and family consequences, and powerful emotional reactions (e.g. frustration, self-doubt, anger, depression) that led to extended reflection, redirection and learning.

4. **Positive models** – Learning from a respected person.

Overall, mentions of strong, positive leadership role models were relatively rare, but when such people were available to participants, they were highly respected and highly valued. Positive models and mentors had their influence through the high standards they set in their own leadership conduct, and through conversations they had with participants at various points in their careers. They appeared to serve as “beacons of light” when participants were otherwise surrounded by leaders who were average or poor. They played a key role in learning related to the treatment of other

people, standards of quality and ethics, and astute solution finding and decision making. They were usually people known directly by participants, but occasionally historical figures played this role.

5. **Negative models** – Learning from people demonstrating what not to do.

Negative models were much more frequently mentioned than positive models, and they came from direct experience, leaders observed from a distance (i.e. in other departments or organisations), and from the news media. Comparing personal beliefs about leadership practices to the styles and behaviours demonstrated by negative models was a primary mechanism for crystallizing participants' views of how they would lead. This covered both matters of leadership style (e.g. treatment of employees, arrogance, integrity), and matters of action (e.g. approaches to conversation, problem analysis, running of meetings).

6. **Personal reflection** – Time spent considering personal values and beliefs.

Personal reflection on leadership, and their own leadership behaviour, was important to all participants as they sorted out their belief about leadership, and continually reassessed their approach and their actions as they moved through different levels of organisations. It was a frequently mentioned and fundamental part of their learning.

7. **Personal crises** – Situations distinguished by trauma and struggle.

Most personal crises occurred when work and personal/family pressures combined. These situations saw career related workload and stress layered on top of failing relationships, issues with children or health problems. Other crises were mainly rooted in the challenges of leadership. For example, as a young manager one participant was so traumatized by having to fire people that it provoked a decision (later reversed) to leave management entirely, and one CEO's crisis revolved around trying to keep a debt laden company afloat and hundreds of people in their jobs. These crises were times of great learning related to personal values, sharing responsibility and delegating, teamwork, relationships and personal resilience.

8. **Accumulated experience** – Learning from a number of sources over years.

This type of learning came from a variety of sources (personal experience, observing others, reading, etc.) over a number of years, and may have been reassessed from time to time. It played an important role in fundamental leadership beliefs that were built up and confirmed as participants moved through non-leadership and leadership positions. It was evidenced when participants would build the case for a certain perspective by drawing on a combination of events spread out over time. For example, they might refer to a student summer job, and then discuss what they observed when they became a manager, and then discuss how they were affected by news stories of unethical corporate leaders.

9. **Structured learning** – Courses, MBA programmes, etc.

This covered learning from university programmes, and leadership development programmes offered by organisations or management schools. This type of learning is notable for how rarely it was mentioned. It appeared to be a source of background information rather than specific models or other types of information that participants distinctly remembered or deliberately used. One of the most common things participants said about his type of learning was that MBA and executive development programmes boosted their confidence by exposing them to leaders from outside of their field, and convincing them that they were just as capable.

These categories provide a “big picture” perspective on the types of learning that helped these professionals become leaders over the course of their careers. The degree to which these leaders are keen about learning is striking. While learning from positive mentors and challenges was expected, it was surprising to see the degree to which participants formed opinions about good leadership by reacting to negative models and situations. The other notable surprise was how rarely formal learning (e.g. MBA courses, executive training) was mentioned. It would be valuable to know if these categories reflect the learning practices of larger populations of leaders. If so, the development of methods to encourage and facilitate these types of learning could make a contribution to leadership development efforts.

When participants discussed how they acquired areas of skill, they tended to emphasize that skills related to working with people, writing, and the intellectual processes of problem solving, strategic thinking and learning were natural strengths that existed when they began their careers. They often commented that these skills had improved over time, but rarely identified anything specific that aided this improvement other than experience and practice. The skill that stood out as different was public speaking. This was a skill that was deliberately developed through training, coaching and practice over long periods of time. The degree to which participants had an inclination towards many of the identified skills raises the question of whether early career strength in these areas might have been a predictor of later success.

Part 3: Unique Leadership Character

The findings as presented to this point have demonstrated that the participants shared a significant amount of common ground in their development. They had come to have a number of common areas of learning and common perspectives even though their professional and organisational backgrounds were diverse. There was, however, substantial individuality in the way that participants portrayed their leadership learning. Their individual views on what they had learned through their careers defined a unique leadership character for each person, and showed that as these professionals transitioned into leadership and onto senior management, they adopted their own brand of leadership. The best way to illustrate this is to describe how selected individuals “stood out from the crowd” in either the path that they took to the executive level, and/or the way that they stressed specific aspects of what they had learned about leadership.

Differences in Learning Experience

While participants shared general categories of learning experiences including positive and negative challenges and good and bad models, their personal journeys to the executive level were very different. Understanding these differences is important to gaining a full picture of their development.

The unique paths taken by some of the participants, as revealed by their narratives, could identify them to those familiar with their high profile careers. Therefore, their paths are only discussed in general terms. The following examples demonstrate the unique nature of their leadership learning experiences.

- One participant is unique in that she leads in a technical context dominated by engineers and technical specialists without the benefit of a formal technical education. She has become respected in the technical world, in large part, because of her capacity to learn about complex matters that would normally be considered well out of her field of expertise. This is dramatically different than most professional executives who are promoted in organisations where it is common for their profession to lead (e.g. nurses in medical services, engineers in oil and gas

companies, professors in universities). This participant has an exceptional passion for learning, and has learned to lead when she is not the expert.

- The next participant is unique due to her career flexibility with time spent in a research environment, government and the private sector. Most other participants advanced their careers in a single service sector or industry. A third example is a participant who worked internationally for a number of years in turbulent developing countries before returning to Canada. Both of these leaders bring broad world views to their leadership and the ability to garner respect as they move from organisation to organisation or country to country.
- A fourth example is a man who advanced from professional to senior executive while being a single parent. He has turned the need to balance single parenthood and a fast rising career into exceptional planning and time management skills.
- Two other participants had early careers in environments that demanded immediate and capable responses to crisis situations. Both of these leaders discussed how these early experiences have given them strong beliefs about the importance of teamwork.
- And finally, one participant stood out for coping with the challenges of being an introvert in a top executive role that made her a high profile public figure.

Each of these paths from professional to senior leader affected the individual's leadership beliefs and practices.

Differences in Leadership Perspective

The following examples reveal how participants came to stress different elements of leadership as their careers advanced. The perspectives are illustrated by quotations and summary statements extracted from their interviews.

- David and Michael stood out for their passionate views on what constitutes real leadership.
 - Nobody has the right to call himself a leader. Other people can call you a leader, and that is a compliment and an honor that can be

bestowed upon you. When others say that they believe in the direction that someone has established, and will voluntarily follow, it shows that they are truly a leader. – David

- Every manager should be a leader, but it is often not the case. Leaders take people in positive directions and support their initiative and success. Some managers, who call themselves leaders, create barriers to achievement and hold people back. – Michael

Both of these participants reflected these views in colourful statements about individuals who claimed to be leaders, but who did not meet their criteria. David referred to one example as “nothing but a life support system for an ego”, and Michael commented that a management team had “lots of management but no leadership”, and one manager was “complete fluff ...nothing more than a suit and a haircut”.

- Marshall was unique in the degree to which he focused on what he had learned about people inside and outside his company. He had strong beliefs about the treatment of employees and becoming an employer of choice, and he believed that proactive community relations gave a company a competitive advantage.
 - People will work hard in a positive environment. You don’t have to “walk all over them”. They will “walk on hot coals” for you, if they respect you and understand the value of your direction. Become an employer of choice, and get great talent that wants to make a contribution. – Marshall
 - Business benefits by proactively addressing community relationships and impacts. It should be seen as an important investment that produces operating advantages, not philanthropy or an expense. – Marshall
- Lorraine was the participant most outspoken about what she had learned about putting professionals into management roles to which they were not suited. She had seen many examples of medical professionals being “force fit” into management with a mentality that “You’re a good nurse. You’ll make a good manager. You’re a good doc. Let’s let you run a hospital.” Her

overall emphasis on finding the fit between positions and peoples' passions and abilities made her unique.

- Adele's unique understanding of leadership focused on the attributes and accountabilities of government and political leaders.
 - Leaders need to be held accountable for providing good leadership and reaching important goals. People should not be put in leadership positions unless they can deliver, and they should not be left in those positions unless they do deliver. People do not deserve leadership roles because of who they are, or what they've done in the past. – Adele
- Catherine stood out for her focus on a leader's need to achieve results. More than any other participant, she focused on getting projects "over the finish line".
 - A leader in a business organisation has a responsibility to get things done, and to get things done well. To get good results it is important to adapt your leadership style to the situation and the group of employees. For example, a team that is disciplined and organized doesn't need the firm hand required for a team that is immature and disorganized. – Catherine
- Craig was distinctive for his focus on learning to manage the image and identity of a top leader, and his understanding of how the top executive's identity shapes the identity of the organisation.
 - To an important degree, the top leader voices the character and image of the institution. "You give the community its sound bites and its elevator speeches." – Craig
 - Leaders have an aura. It is important to shape how you are perceived by others. – Craig

It is important to note that while these executives have different backgrounds, and have evolved their own unique approach to leadership, they are the same people who had so much common ground in important areas of leadership learning. One is struck by how much they are alike, while also being so different. This raises questions about the best ways to provide core areas of leadership development, while embracing the value of a variety of leadership styles.

Part 4: Profound Change

Developing as a Leader and a Person

As the interviews progressed, it was clear that when participants were asked to discuss their leadership related learning, they took this to include some very profound personal changes that they went through as they adapted to living in more and more senior leadership positions. They revealed how developing as a leader and developing as a person were linked, and they talked of leadership growth as a profound journey involving a great deal of self reflection, personal change and even struggle. These executives clearly demonstrated that leadership was not easy. Along the way they were challenged to access personal strengths, put their own stamp on the leadership they displayed, and become stronger on a personal level. Some of the executives spoke directly about this journey being difficult, so difficult that they reached points where they left, or seriously considered leaving their jobs. For others, the challenge was more easily managed, but was still evident in their stories. One of Justin's summary statements addressed the scope of the transition.

- Certain roles are literally life-changing, and you have to be prepared to step up to all of the demands and expectations. When you become one of a select group at the top of a large organisation you are seen differently by employees and by the people who used to be your peers. The time demands and pressures are significant. They impact your whole life experience, including your family. – Justin

Reviewing the participants' narratives in a more holistic way, rather than just analyzing them for the acquisition of specific insights and skills, revealed three higher level types of development associated with the transition from professional to executive. These were labeled:

1. Personal leadership alignment,
2. Increasing capability, confidence and courage, and
3. Personal adaptation.

Personal Leadership Alignment

The first type of development observed in the participants' narratives involved finding the fit between the kind of person each participant was and the kind of leader they wanted to be. This development was referred to as "personal leadership alignment". All of the executives in the study dealt with finding this alignment, and they showed it to be a career long struggle that does not end even when you are the CEO.

The interviews revealed that in searching for this alignment the executives had dealt with a series of questions at various stages in their careers. The questions change depending on the situations and pressures being dealt with at the time. Examples of these questions, paraphrased in the writers words, include:

- What do I believe constitutes good leadership?
- What values and principles do I bring to leadership? What foundation do I stand on when I make hard decisions?
- What do I believe about hiring and firing? What standards should shape who I bring onto my team? What standards should affect the life changing decision to take away someone's income?
- How should I adapt my leadership approach to fit my personality and my intellectual and interpersonal strengths and weaknesses?
- What do I believe about holding a high status position? Am I smarter or better than others? Do I serve others?
- Do I treat people differently now that I have such a significant position?
- How do I hold on to my principles of good leadership when pressured by my boss or Board, the organisation's culture, special interest groups, the union, my own fear of failure, or the temptation to act in my own interest?

Each of the interviewed executives explored questions like these in their own way. One of the most common ways to get clarity on what they believed was to reflect on the actions of other managers, particularly managers they did not like or respect. Positive mentors were very important, but examples of poor leadership seem to incite more determination to find a better way. Time after time these executives recalled situations where as a young professional they had been mistreated or demoralized by someone they considered a bad supervisor,

manager, or executive. In some cases, this led to rebelling against the old regime, and to bringing a new leadership style to their team or organisation when they were able to do so. The leaders in the study also thought a great deal about leaders in other organisations, in politics, and in the news. They had strong opinions about leaders they saw acting in their own interest, becoming arrogant, “throwing their weight around”, or violating standards of conduct. The following summary statement from Justin described the process.

- You gradually discover the leadership attributes and principles that fit you and your values. It is a matter of finding the approaches to leadership that fit your personality and the things you stand for. Over time, you test these approaches out and come to believe in what is right for you. - Justin

Finding personal leadership alignment caused these leaders to search for “who they were” and “what they stood for” early in their careers when they had to fire someone for the first time, or lead a team of people who used to be their peers. Then, as they faced changing circumstances and pressures, they were challenged to re-think their beliefs and principles at difference stages. They did not take it lightly, and sometimes it led to serious difficulties as they found themselves in conflict with bosses whom they considered outdated, unethical, misguided, or incompetent.

Increasing Capability, Confidence and Courage

The second type of leadership development involving major personal change was “increasing capability, confidence and courage”. At various times in their careers, most of these executives had been pushed beyond their self-judged limits, and had succeeded in situations where they could have failed. Sometimes the stretch was moderate, sometimes it was dramatic. One of the executives had managed a large hospital’s critical care unit in her 20’s. Another had supervised a massive construction project with no previous construction experience. A third became treasurer in a large corporation without a background in finance or accounting. Routinely they solved problems, took initiative and were put into challenging situations that required them to “stick their necks out” and ultimately prepared them for the bigger decisions and problems that are dealt with at the executive

level. Along the way, they came to expand their view of their capabilities and build the confidence, and even courage, to take on things that would overwhelm others.

One interesting aspect of building capability and confidence was learning how to work with difficult and aggressive people in positions of power and influence.

Many organisations have such people, and learning to handle them was an important part of being comfortable in senior management. This is an area where the word “courage” is appropriate because the risk can be high.

The following summary statements reflect how participant saw this type of development.

- Leadership can involve some very challenging and stressful times that push you, your values and your judgment to the limits. If you handle them well, you come away with greater confidence as a leader. – Marshall
- Being able to overcome your fears, and show up with competence in high profile situations, can be critical to how you are perceived by others. Like athletes or musicians, those who rise to the top can perform under pressure. – Catherine
- The confidence and competence required for senior leadership comes from succeeding in the face of challenge. Taking on a series of challenges, starting early in your career, helps you feel more capable, and your leaders come to trust your ability. - Lorraine
- Leadership takes courage rooted in understanding your purpose and values and being willing to act on them. You need to transcend some of the things that might scare you. It is important that leaders learn to overcome their fears so that they can make decisions for the right reasons and communicate their positions honestly. It is not a matter of being arrogant or overconfident. It is a matter of being strong, and not being swayed to be quiet or to move in the wrong direction. - Michelle
- Progressive challenges build confidence. A leader’s career benefits from projects, relationships, circumstances that are difficult at the time they are experienced. Rising to the occasion to deal with such challenges builds confidence and resilience, and stretches the scope of what you can handle. Challenge opens the door to learning and growth. – Marshall

Personal Adaptation

The third type of personal development in leadership growth was **personal adaptation**. Most of the executives in this group had been through times when they had to look at themselves and/or their impact on others, make hard decisions and plot new courses for how they worked, related to other people, or handled their personal and family lives. Examples included:

- learning to be aware of their day to day impact on others and to deliberately improve their interpersonal style,
- confronting the reality that their leadership caused major problems, and shifting to a better approach,
- getting past being overwhelmed and wanting to quit,
- balancing the competing time demands of family and career, and keeping perspective on the heavy emotional load (e.g. guilt, worry) that comes from trying to be too many things to too many people,
- surviving the crunch between career pressures and major problems at home,
- rising above a period of negative feedback and failure,
- handling serious conflict with important players in the organisations and returning to a positive perspective,
- refocusing and finding meaning in life,
- letting go of attachment to a high status position, and being willing to quit to maintain principles or reach life goals.

Summary

The interviews and subsequent analysis produced a large amount of information directly addressing the research questions.

Questions #1 & #3: Many examples of events and experiences were gathered with details on how contextual elements such as relationships contributed. It was possible to describe nine types of events and experiences that played central roles in the learning of common insights and skills.

Question #2: It was possible to identify both common, and less frequently mentioned insights and skills that participants felt were important to their leadership development.

Question #4: The findings revealed that participants had substantial common ground in their leadership learning, but also had some very individual learning opportunities and unique aspects to their leadership.

One surprising element in the findings was the extent to which participants had engaged in personal sense-making and built a large collection of insights, complete with background examples and stories, that were revealed in the narratives. Another surprise was the willingness of participants to discuss learning that included struggles and emotions that would typically be kept private. They uncovered dimensions of deep personal challenge and change that developing leaders, organisations, trainers and coaches need to understand. Overall, these findings raise important questions about whether the patterns seen here apply to other professionals on the path to the executive office. If they do, there are important implications for leadership development practices.

Chapter VI: Conclusions and Recommendations

The study was designed to look deeply into the leadership learning experiences of a group of 12 senior executives who began their careers in professional roles. Given a lack of similar research, the intention was to contribute to an initial base of understanding concerning this “professional to senior leader” transition, with an emphasis on what leaders learn and how they learn it, as seen through their direct experience and recall. The study was first and foremost about understanding the experiences of this specific group of executives as they reflected on those experiences, and a great deal has been revealed in this regard. This, in turn, has raised a series of important questions for organisations, leadership coaches, leadership development specialists and researchers to consider.

The chapter identifies ten conclusions. The first four address overall observations concerning:

1. a core body of understanding and ability,
2. the importance of each participant’s unique path,
3. the degree to which participants were avid learners, and
4. apparent alignment with published works on leadership.

The second four conclusions address specifics of the learning processes the participants went through as they established their competence as leaders, including:

5. evolution of an extensive and integrated set of leadership related beliefs and principles,
6. reflection on positive and negative experiences to define a personal stance,
7. dealing with progressively more difficult challenges, and
8. undergoing profound personal change.

This is followed by two conclusions related to methodology which address:

9. the usefulness of in-depth interviewing based on narrative inquiry, and
10. the recruitment of busy managers into time consuming research processes.

Recommendations are provided immediately following the conclusions from which they arise. These recommendations challenge practitioners and researchers to address some of the key unanswered questions, and to explore whether the patterns found in these participants exist in other populations.

The process of considering the research, drawing these conclusions and formulating the recommendations has also caused the researcher to reflect on his own leadership coaching practice. The impacts this study has had on his practice are discussed following the recommendations.

Overall Conclusions Related to Learning in the Transition from Professional to Senior Leader

#1: The findings support the notion that there is a core body of leadership understanding and ability that benefits leaders across many types of organisations.

Even though the participants came from widely diverse backgrounds and types of organisations, this in-depth exploration shows that there was considerable overlap in the areas of leadership learning that they felt contributed to their success. This was demonstrated by the 18 areas of insight shared by 7 or more participants, by the most frequently mentioned skills, and by the patterns of personal change. While learning to lead a police service, a university and a large business clearly require some different areas of expertise, it is striking that when the leaders in this study spoke of the learning that had been important to their success as leaders, they tended to concentrate on a core set of topics. These included how to: a) interact and communicate with employees, b) be guided by principles and values, c) deliver solutions and results, d) be open to learning and ideas, and e) manage the stresses of leadership.

The fact that this sample revealed common areas of learning and change begs the question of whether these patterns exist generally among professionals who make the transition to executive positions in large organisations. If they do, it may be possible to:

- identify a common body of leadership related learning that would support this key transition, as identified by leaders who have made the transition themselves,
- compare leadership theories to the patterns identified by these leaders, and
- have enough support for the importance of these areas of understanding, skill and personal development to apply them to leadership development initiatives.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that the academic/research community work with organisations to ensure that additional research is conducted to determine if the areas of leadership learning that were common within this sample also prove to be important in larger samples a) within specific professions (e.g., nurses, engineers, lawyers), b) within specific types of organisations (e.g., banking, social services), and c) in different cultural contexts. It would be valuable to apply a similar narrative based approach, and/or large sample techniques to determine if such research supports or contradicts the results in this project.
- It is recommended that specific companies and public organisations, and the leadership specialists working in them, conduct internal research to see if their own experienced leaders support the finding of this project. If so, leadership development plans can be adapted to focus on these areas of learning.
- It is recommended that leadership trainers and coaches explore these areas of learning with their clients and workshop participants to determine the degree to which the people they work with support or contradict the results of this study. This, in turn, will help them shape their work in leadership development.

#2: The combination of unique individual backgrounds and unique career experiences shaped each participant's leadership learning and the style of leadership they ultimately evolved.

While it has been shown that participants discussed many of the same areas of learning, each person's path of learning was distinctly different, and each person became their own type of leader. This raises questions about the degree to which organisations help developing leaders make sense of their own experiences and challenges, and find their own functional approach to leadership. While this study did not focus on personality or pre-career life experiences, each participant began their career as a unique young adult with an existing set of attributes and past experiences. From there, participants contrasted further in the extent to which they had early career exposure to intense crisis situations, face to face interaction with upper management, work in other cultures, and a number of other types of experiences. Some participants were impacted by working in small organisations that grew, or moved through a series of organisations. Others spent their whole careers in the same large organisation. Some went through times of serious personal difficulty. Others experienced stressful phases but at less traumatic levels. It is not surprising that people are different, or that careers are different, but the degree to which these differences will ultimately shape an organisation's leaders is striking.

All of the executives in this study were promoted to the top levels of large organisations because they were capable of making significant contributions as leaders, and yet all of them approached leadership in somewhat different ways. The author's experience as an executive coach, however, suggests that there is still a tendency for some managers and organisations to expect developing leaders to conform to a dominant leadership style, even when it conflicts with the developing leader's personality and values.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that human resource professional, leadership development specialists, and senior executives examine the degree to which their organisations' selection, promotion and leadership development practices limit the range of leadership talent by imposing expectations that leaders "fit a certain mold", and instead ensure that their practices are open minded about the kind of leadership talent that can bring value.
- It is recommended that those educating leaders and potential leaders in universities, leadership training programmes and internal leadership development initiatives stress the need for leaders to develop an individualized leadership style, and provide workshops, mentoring and coaching that facilitates the required personal reflection and choices.

#3: The participants were avid learners who personally pursued a wide range of learning opportunities, and who stressed that good leadership requires a focus on continuous learning and an open minded approach to discussion and challenging ideas.

The degree to which the participants drove their own learning appeared to be fundamental to their development and a defining characteristic of their leadership. The essential observation is that these leaders sought out learning and thought provoking ideas. They stressed the need to tap into the expertise of others and identified discussion and listening as top skills. They sought out broad based understanding of their businesses or fields, and valued provocative discussion. Many spoke of being avid readers, and observation of good and bad leaders inside and outside their organisations was fundamental to their own learning. This is likely impacted by the nature of the sampling that emphasized the inclusion of respected leaders, and contrasts with the style of leaders who are arrogant about their own level of knowledge and close minded.

This conclusion is significant because it suggests that an open minded love of learning may be a significant determinant of a leader's success.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that academics/researchers develop ways to assess a passion for learning and new ideas that would be practical for use in the workplace, and conduct research to explore if a “drive to learn” is a useful criterion in leader selection.
- It is recommended that educators, trainers and coaches help leaders understand the role that avid learning plays in handling challenges related to such things as evolving technology, market shifts, and new strategy.

#4: While participants’ views aligned in significant ways with published works on leadership, the role that specific leadership related theories and models played in their development is unclear.

Even though participants readily shared their understanding of leadership, over the course of the interviews there were very few references to books or courses, or to specific theories or models concerning leadership or related matters such as strategic planning, communication or change management. Participants preferred to discuss their learning in terms of their own experiences and opinions rather than in terms of the opinions of authors, professors or trainers.

There was, however, substantial alignment between the ideas the leaders expressed and published theories and research on leadership. The following points provide examples.

- Although they did not label themselves as such, the executives in this study clearly appeared to see themselves as transformational leaders rather than just managers or transactional leaders (Burns, 1978). Their themes related to motivating people through respectful treatment, seeking out new ideas, encouraging debate and exploration, creating solutions, cultivating influence and leading change all align with the idealized influence, inspirational leadership, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration associated with transformational leadership (Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino, 1991).

- The emphasis on values and principles is consistent with the literature's focus on ethical leadership (Brown and Trevino, 2006). The importance of standing on one's values and being respected for taking principles stances was the second most commonly mentioned area of learning discussed by participants. It was also an area discussed with a great deal of personal commitment and passion.
- The notion that authentic leaders understand themselves, act based on values and beliefs and are transparent in the interactions (Avolio et al., 2004) also fits with the participants' focus on values and principles. Plus we see "authenticity" in the theme on being "willing to reveal what you care about and how you think", and in the career long pursuit for alignment between leadership style and one's personality, values and beliefs.
- The emphasis on serving the organisation, and not getting caught up in arrogance and personal privilege, directly aligns with writings on servant leadership (Graham, 1991).
- The importance of charismatic leadership is revealed in a way that is much more subtle than what is suggested by Jung and Sosik's (2006) descriptor of "spell binders". In fact, none of the participants described themselves as charismatic, and the impression they most left during the interviews was that they would have been somewhat uncomfortable with such a label. Instead they preferred to emphasize having influence through relationship building. It is notable, however, that public speaking was the most frequently mentioned skill, and that combines with the idea of having influence to suggest charisma at some level.
- The participants' focus on bringing out the best in people by treating them with respect, listening to people, showing a human side, and seeking to understand the needs of others shows similarities with the application of emotional intelligence to leadership (Goleman, 1995, Rajah, Song and Arvey, 2011).

Overall, the views of the participants might be taken as confirmation of these theories, or at least as evidence that a group of real-world executives share some of the underlying thinking. However, we are left with a number of questions. Were participants influenced by leadership theories, and if so how? Did they have a background base of leadership knowledge gained from books and courses that they felt no longer warranted discussion compared to their experiences? Are their views the product of a larger culture of leadership thinking that has developed among managers in the last few decades?

Six of the participants had graduate degrees designed to prepare people for leadership roles (e.g. MBA, Administration), and all of these leaders worked for large organisations that commonly made leadership training available. Most, if not all, of the participants had been exposed to leadership training, and given their avid approach to learning, it seems unlikely that these leaders were not exposed to leadership theory. However, the mechanism by which that exposure integrated with experiential learning to ultimately shape their leadership views remains a puzzle. It also seems likely that this integration is handled differently by different people. For example, some people may be highly impressed by books on leadership, while others rarely read them.

Recommendations:

- It is recommended that leadership coaches consult with their clients about the courses and writers who have impacted their approach to leadership, so that the coach can understand how each specific client has been influenced by these sources and assist them in the process of integrating this type of learning with their on-the-job experiences.
- It is recommended that those providing leadership education and training cooperate with researchers in studies to understand how formal learning impacts experiential learning and vice versa.
- It is recommended that academics/researchers explore the degree to which the views and practices of organisational leaders are impacted by books, internet sources and writers who shape a contemporary leadership culture.

Summary for Conclusions 1 – 4: These conclusions reveal key elements in a big picture view of the participants’ growth as leaders. This was a group of people with a serious drive to learn, and this drive played an important role in helping them succeed in the transition from professional to senior leader. We see that a great deal of the learning they remembered and valued was experiential, and we are left with a lack of clarity around the role of personal reading, leadership development programmes, and post-secondary education. The big picture also shows the striking degree to which they came to common conclusions about the learning that was important to their success. The participants shared many areas of insight, skill and personal change. However, they also showed unique tendencies and experiences that led each person to put a unique stamp on their leadership.

Conclusions related to Specifics of the Learning Process

Conclusions 5 – 8 identify four learning processes that might be seen as “naturally occurring” in the careers of participants. These processes are:

1. Evolution of leadership beliefs and principles
2. Reflecting on positive and negative examples
3. Gaining strength through progressive challenge
4. Deeper personal change

These processes reveal a great deal about how participants became the leaders they ultimately became. Two overall recommendations are made related to these processes, and then conclusions and recommendations are made as they relate to each specific learning process.

Overall Recommendations

- It is recommended that researchers and practitioners work together to gain a better understanding of these learning processes, and explore ways of using structured learning and coaching to facilitate them. There is a need to confirm the degree to which they are commonly part of the process of moving from professional to leader, and to gain a more complete understanding of how they are experienced by supervisors and managers in organisations. Plus, there is a need to

explore the advantages and disadvantages of deliberately using a variety of techniques to support developing leaders as they engage in these learning processes that appear to be a ‘natural’ part of growing as a leader.

- It is recommended that leadership educators, trainers and coaches work in their practices to deliberately enhance these learning processes as they are judged to apply to the leadership growth and learning of the people with whom they work.

#5: For the executives in this study, the transition from professional to senior leader **involved the gradual and continuous evolution of an extensive and integrated set of leadership related beliefs and principles.**

As noted in Chapter V on Project Activity, the participants each discussed an average of 24 areas of leadership insight and understanding over their three hours of interviews, and the ease with which they articulated these areas of learning, and illustrated them with examples and stories, suggested a large amount of previous personal reflection on the challenges of leadership. Each participant had assembled a collection of personal leadership “wisdom” that helped them to explain and guide their actions as leaders. The extensive nature of this collection of ideas and principles was reflected in the large number of distinct topics they were able to discuss. Some of that wisdom appeared closely related to their original professional skills set. For example, as professionals they were good at analyzing issues and finding solutions, and as leaders they emphasized the need to continue bringing good solutions to their organisations but to do it through a combination of their own ability and the abilities of those they led. Other areas of their wisdom showed a body of leadership expertise notably different than their original professional capabilities. Examples here include managing organisational change, leading teams and dealing with the ethical dilemmas of senior management.

It is noteworthy that this “library” of understanding was still evolving for these leaders. While they sometimes gave examples of learning and sense-making that occurred many years earlier and now appeared quite established for them, other examples revealed how very recent events had caused them to re-think other

issues and continue to grapple with them. These were often ethical issues or views on handling challenges related to people. In some cases, the interview process seemed to help them sort through their experiences and come to a more defined opinion. Participants routinely commented that they found it very interesting and helpful to discuss and clarify their leadership beliefs, and have them captured in a written summary. This is reminiscent of what Janson (2008) observed when she asked leaders to share stories of formative experiences, and elaborate and reflect on them. She noted that this kind of processing of one's own experiences and stories appeared to lead to greater learning. It also aligns with Shamir and Eilam (2005) who propose that there is more to developing as a leader than can be achieved by standardized training. They argue that guided reflection on life stories and specific life events could make an important contribution to the development of authentic leaders. Something similar may have been going on for these participants as they gathered ideas learned over decades, clarified them in response to the interviewer's questions, gave examples and stories, and saw how they all fit together. The interview and validation process used in the study may have helped these leaders achieve a more complete understanding of their own accumulated learning as they carried it in the narrative that they had developed over time, and replayed in self-talk and discussion.

Recommendation

- It is recommended that leadership trainers and coaches develop learning experiences including exercises and personal diaries to support leadership development by helping emerging leaders express and clarify their growing repertoire of insights and “bring them out into the open”. Exercises and discussions could allow leaders to test their own set of beliefs against new learning (theories, case studies, skills inventories, etc.), while helping them build their base of leadership beliefs and principles.

#6: Leadership growth was facilitated by reflecting on positive and negative experiences to define a personal stance.

On many occasions, participants described how their own view of leadership had been shaped by working with, observing, or reading about leaders they did not respect. Their reaction to these negative models caused them to reject leadership behavior they felt was unethical or dysfunctional, and form opinions about the kind of leader they wanted to be. The same type of process occurred with other negative work experiences. These experiences motivated participants to reflect on what had gone wrong, for example with a team or project, and consider what could have been done better. Positive leadership mentors and positive work experiences encouraged a similar process by serving as examples of good leadership, teamwork, etc. However, the negative experiences were mentioned more frequently and the negative sentiment was still very obvious in the participants' narratives many years after the events took place. This type of learning had a lasting impact, and appeared to be a very common mechanism in the process of establishing a personal vision of good leadership.

The tendency to learn about leadership by contrasting positive and negative leadership styles and work experiences also appears to have potential in leader education and coaching, but it is limited by the taboo on speaking disapprovingly about people and situations in your own organisation.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that leadership educators and trainers provide the opportunity to safely reflect on good and bad experiences, and good and bad leadership models including managers who mistreat people, dull motivation and damage organisations. The goal of this work should be to allow developing supervisors and managers to accelerate the evolution of their own constructive approach to leadership.
- It is recommended the leadership coaches be made aware of the importance of this kind of reflection and sense-making, and be encouraged to make the most of the confidential coaching relationships to support this important aspect of leadership learning.

#7: A series of progressively more difficult challenges requiring both professional skills and leadership skills was a key element in the transition from professional to senior leader.

As noted in the findings, the careers of the participants were typically one challenge after another. These challenges included demanding projects and assignments, and new jobs that tested their capabilities and carried a very real possibility of failure. Their ability to handle these challenges stretched their own view of what they could do, and led to them being assigned even greater challenges and responsibilities. Early on, these challenges relied heavily on professional abilities, but often these individuals were promoted while quite young and leadership skills quickly became important. As their careers progressed, the relative importance of their professional abilities and their leadership abilities “re-balanced” depending on the demands of specific projects and roles. The cycle of “challenge-success-more challenge” was central to developing the capability, confidence and courage needed for senior leadership. It also appeared to serve a kind of diagnostic function for the organisation by demonstrating that these individuals were strong contributors who could be promoted.

Providing these types of challenges is one of the most concrete things an organisation can do to facilitate leadership development, but it may be possible to do it in a way that improves the focus and extent of the learning.

Recommendation

- It is recommended that senior managers who are assigning challenging tasks move away from a sink or swim mentality, and make challenge assignments a deliberately structured part of the practice of leadership development. For this to happen, it will be necessary for human resource professionals and employee development programmes to provide guidance on the selection of appropriate challenges. It will also be necessary for organisations to provide mentoring and/or coaching during such challenging times, and to support “debriefing” so that employees can reflect on the experience, integrate the learning, and gain confidence even if the outcome was not entirely positive.

#8: By the time the participants reached the senior management level, their leadership related learning had gone well beyond the accumulation of insights and skills to include **profound personal change**.

The personal changes experienced by participants on their path to the executive level may signal one of the biggest differences between a career in which an individual remains in a professional role and a career of increasing management responsibility. For these people, the increasing challenge and stress, the ethical dilemmas, the status changes, and the need to keep re-thinking fundamental life questions about relationships, purpose and priorities stimulated a deep and continuing process of change that they would not have experienced had they remained a front line professional. This is not to say that career professionals do not experience personal change. It is simply a recognition that these executives experienced types of change driven by leadership itself, and by the circumstances that surround living in leadership positions. While a concept like authentic leadership requires leaders to explore their values and purpose, and different assessment tools and training programmes are used to alert managers to the need to adapt their styles to different people and circumstances, there does not appear to be widespread recognition of just how profoundly the process of developing as a leader also challenges and develops the whole person. It is unlikely that when a young professional thinks about becoming a senior executive they understand the process as one of profound change and even struggle. It is also unlikely that they understand the degree to which successfully handling this change will impact their personal happiness, their family and their success. Similarly, when organisations approach leadership development with lists of leadership competencies and a curriculum planning mentality, they may be seriously underestimating the degree to which employees need a much deeper process of learning to be a leader.

The process of personal change that participants experienced is another element of learning that calls for more attention in the leadership development field. The executives in this study revealed a much more complete and honest view of what is involved in becoming a leader than is reflected in typical leadership training curricula. Not discussing that the transition from professional to leader involves struggling with questions of ethics and self-concept, overcoming fears, and

needing to make tough personal changes leaves developing leaders in the dark about important aspects of the learning they are undertaking.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that leadership educators and trainers alert potential leaders and developing leaders to the realities of personal change that are often part of growing as a leader. Leaders need to understand that they are not unique if they struggle with such change, and need the support of friends and professionals (coaches, advisors, therapists).
- It is recommended that leadership coaches inquire about matters of profound change as they assess client needs, and include support for such change in their ongoing work with developing leaders and executives.
- It is recommended that “coaching during times of profound personal change” be made a continuing education topic for leadership coaches.

Summary for Conclusions 5 – 8: These conclusions deal with underlying processes in leadership development experienced by the participants as they learned about leadership and adapted to its demands. We think of leadership development as activities like courses, coaching programmes and special assignments, but these conclusions reveal what was going on inside the person living the role of leader. We can see that these leaders continually worked at establishing and refining a kind of personal library of leadership wisdom by gradually sorting out their beliefs, and making sense of the good and bad things they experienced and observed. We also see that their confidence and competence was extended step by step through exposure to challenges that in some cases were extreme. And finally, it is notable that the process of reaching the executive level often involved profound personal change driven by the demands of leadership.

The challenge is for practitioners to become more skilled at helping developing leaders as they engage in these underlying processes. It should not be assumed that the exploration of these types of learning will be all positive. For example, there may be risks related to exposing otherwise private experiences in a group of

peers, and certain types of exploration may be better done in private. Coaches and mentors appear to have important roles to play in this regard.

Conclusions relating to the Usefulness of the Methodology

The final two conclusions support continued use of this type of research in the leadership development and management studies arenas.

#9: In-depth interviewing based on narrative inquiry proved to be a useful tool for understanding leadership development as it occurs in the context of actual career experience.

Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005) and Shaw (2010) both called for more work using narrative research to explore the experience of developing as a leader. This project demonstrated the ability of this approach to access a great deal of useful information that would be extremely difficult to acquire through any other methodology. While it carried the limitations discussed earlier, it provided the benefits of seeing leadership growth through the recollections of leaders as they made sense of the learning process, and as they saw the relationship between what was learned and their subsequent success. It became clear that the participants had done a great deal of thinking about their leadership development and beliefs prior to the study. The interview process effectively “opened the tap” and allowed a large volume of material to flow from the interviewees with depth and detail. The participants appeared to have a strong need to find ways to make sense of their leadership experiences, and to capture their explanations in narrative form. This type of narrative focused in-depth interviewing should prove useful in other attempts to explore both the development of leaders and the lived experience of working in leadership positions.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that academics and scientist-practitioners make additional use of narrative research, and take advantage of the valuable window it provides on the leader’s perspective and the

leader's experience. It could be used to explore a number of issues related to the professional to leader transition, and leadership more generally.

- It is recommended that academics and scientist-practitioners use narrative research to look more deeply at a number of specific components of the professional to leader transition including: a professional's first experience as a supervisor, adapting to no longer having top level professional expertise, and the process of redefining oneself as a leader.
- It is recommended that narrative research be used to explore the leadership experience more broadly including topics such as relationships with respected and disrespected bosses, ethical dilemmas, times of extreme challenge and pressure, and the interface between work life and personal life.

#10: Otherwise difficult to access organisational managers can be recruited into time consuming research processes if they perceive the research to be valuable to the field of leadership, enjoyable, and personally rewarding

Accessing the time of busy managers and executives is difficult, and yet a group of top leaders engaged enthusiastically in this research project and gave it more than three hours of their time. The first hurdle was to gain their agreement to participate. The key was being able to approach them through an existing credible relationship with the promise that they would not have to do extensive preparation, and could expect to enjoy a conversation in which they simply shared their experiences. They were also promised a brief written summary of their perspectives on leaderships. The interviews demonstrated that the process was actually easy, and the participants enjoyed the thought provoking process of reflecting on their experiences. They frequently commented that the time went quickly, and that they found value in reviewing the basis of their own leadership beliefs and having it fed back to them in a written summary. A number commented that it would be a useful reference on occasions when they might speak to other leaders or review their leadership approach a few years into the

future. Other studies using a similar approach would also be likely to gain access to this population.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that academics/researchers and leadership coaches cooperate on research projects designed to advance coaching and leadership development. This work can take advantage of the access to leaders that coaches can provide and the research expertise within universities.
- It is recommended that research projects access the time of executives and other employee groups by developing studies that offer ease, comfort and return benefits to participants.

Impact on the Researcher and His Leadership Coaching Practice:

Personal Reflections

On a personal and professional level, one of the most obvious impacts of this study was the degree to which it added to my understanding of the life experiences of the people who are my coaching clients. The following points stand out to me as insights that impact my current and future work. They have significance for anyone working in the leadership coaching and development field.

1. **Senior leaders do a surprising amount of personal reflection and sense-making to explain their approach to leadership, and they carry a large collection of insights in a narrative “library”.** - I have learned that asking my clients to share these narratives gives me a much deeper understanding of their life and career prior to the time I begin working with them. These narratives also provide great case studies for leadership development workshops.
2. **Given a high level of trust and a sense of value, senior leaders are willing to give precious time to research, and to share highly personal stories normally kept private.** - Seeing the participants in this study respond with such enthusiasm has challenged me to step up as a scientist-practitioner, and to use my access to leaders to continue to explore their experiences.
3. **Junior leaders have little understanding of the tough choices, struggles and traumas they may face if they pursue a path to senior leadership. Even experienced leaders feel blindsided and alone in the face of such events.** – I have begun making more effort to normalize struggle with my clients, and help them see it as an opportunity to become a stronger leader. I have also begun writing and

making presentations on this point to alert other coaches to its significance.

4. **Leadership coaches often do not understand the bigger picture of development that their clients go through as they move up through the leadership ranks. The coach is, therefore, less able to help with that development.** I am adapting my own practice to support the broader development of my clients, and working at creating tools to help clients recognize challenges related to leadership alignment and major life changes. This means helping clients focus on their development, rather than just their leadership skill and achievements.
5. **There appears to be more common ground than I would have thought in the approaches to leadership that can be successfully apply in very different environments.** – I am challenged to explore whether the common insights and skills revealed in this study apply to my coaching clients, and to larger populations that I may want to engage in training programmes. This may be done effectively through a questionnaire/survey. It would be valuable to confirm that larger numbers of experienced leaders see a core set of insights and skills that can be a focus for leadership development in diverse settings.
6. **Even CEO's keep searching for a way of leading that resonates with their personality, beliefs and values. This search is continuous and never ending because the demands keep changing.** – The lesson here has been to not assume that my most experienced and accomplished clients do not need to occasionally go back to basics and confirm their fundamental beliefs about leadership, and how they want to show up and live as a human being.
7. **Negative models and negative experiences play a surprising role in helping leaders define who they do not want to be. This, in turn, promotes reflection on the kind of leader they do want to be.** – In coaching, it is very common to ask clients to reflect on positive models. This realization has allowed me to see that negative models are equally useful in helping clients resolve how to approach leadership challenges and define a leadership style that feels right for them.
8. **Participating leaders said that the process of being interviewed and having their insights summarized was very helpful in giving them clarity. A similar process could be a powerful leadership development tool.** – I am exploring a workshop process and/or personal diary exercise to allow leaders to use their personal narratives for reflection and discussion, and clarification of the beliefs that provide the foundation for their leadership.

Most of my leadership coaching clients are mid or late career leaders in the senior ranks of large organisations. Overall, this project has given me much deeper insight into the types of experiences that shape their leadership and impact their lives at work and at home. This, in turn, has led to greater understanding of how my work as a coach and educator can support their development .

Summary and Closing Perspectives

This project addressed a lack of research offering an in-depth view of leadership development as it is seen by leaders themselves. It was focused specifically on the development that occurs as employees begin careers in professional roles and then advance into senior management. The leaders' perspectives were vital to the study. They determined what had been important to them in terms of leadership related learning, and to the greatest extent possible, they made their choices without prompting. They discussed what they had learned, and how they had learned it, in their own words and stories, and the goal was to capture it and have them validate that the meaning had not been lost. We have seen that the participating executives were avid learners who carried an impressive personal library of leadership understanding gathered through years of experience and reflection, and subject to ongoing refinement. They expressed their experiences with an enthusiasm and passion that never could have come through in a questionnaire or survey, and their interviews were full of ideas and tips that have direct application in the workplace. They gave a very human, real-world view of growing as a leader, and even shared personal struggles that revealed that the path from front line professional to the executive office can be a rocky road.

In such a diverse sample, there was a surprising amount of common ground, and the recommendations challenge researchers and practitioners to determine the extent to which these patterns exist among other managers. Should organisations or professions find that their leaders have similar experiences and views, ways to improve leadership development practices have been suggested. The narrative approach also allowed a privileged view inside the lives of these leaders that alerts us to the unique nature of each individual, and demands that organisations see beyond skill inventories and training content to recognize that moving from professional to senior leader is an emotional life changing journey.

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Appendix I

Protocol for Participant Selection and Ethical Standards

Protocol for Participant Selection and Ethical Standards

The following criteria guided the selection of participants in a purposeful sampling process seeking wide variation.

1. Include a broad representation of professions, not heavily weighted to any one group.
2. Include a broad representation of types of organisations from both the public sector and private sector.
3. Aim for approximately equal numbers of public and private sector participants.
4. Aim for equal numbers of men and women.
5. Include only leaders with senior executive experience in organisations with more than 1,000 employees.
6. Include only leaders with substantial responsibility for decision making and personnel.
7. Include only leaders who, to the best knowledge of the researcher, are largely respected within their organisation.

The following standards were established to ensure that participants were treated fairly and ethically.

1. Participants will be fully briefed on the process and purpose of the study, and be encouraged to ask about any aspect that interests or concerns them.
2. The input of participants will be represented as accurately as possible. Participants will have the opportunity to validate the main points they have made.
3. Participants will be kept anonymous, unless they decide to reveal their participation. They will be asked to not reveal their participation until after completion of the interviews, so that they are aware of all of the topics they have discussed and their possible implications.
4. All reporting will take care to exclude specific information that could allow readers to identify individual participants based on their history, location, organisation, etc.

Appendix II

Briefing Handout for Participants

Critical Learning Events Contributing to the Development of Senior Level Leadership Ability

Participating in the Research

The Opportunity

Senior leaders tend to move fast, and often have little time to reflect on the beliefs, principles and skills that are central to their leadership. It can be very useful to stop and ask: What are the most important things I have learned about leadership? What people, events and learning opportunities have shaped my thinking? How did my thinking change as my leadership matured?

Participating in this project will allow you to answer these questions and confirm the foundations of your leadership style.

Participating is easy, and because it is a university research project, there is no cost. Your role will be to sit in relaxed conversation, and simply share stories about the times when you feel you learned something important about leadership. There is little preparation required, and you do not need to worry about coming up with something profound. The conversation will be guided by executive coach Ric Durrant, and will take place in 3 sessions of one hour each spread over 1 – 4 months. This will allow your recollections to arise easily over time. Ric will debrief the process with you and provide a written summary of your personal leadership learning experiences.

The Value of this Research

How can reminiscing about past learning be helpful? The value comes from analyzing the experiences of all participants to pull out patterns that suggest how to support the development of future executives.

Many organizations need a select group of their top professionals (engineers, lawyers, nurses, accountants, educators, etc.) to progressively become competent senior leaders. What these people learn about leadership along the way, and how they learn it, is actually quite hidden from others. Human resource professionals, trainers, and junior leaders who aspire to move to the executive table rarely get an inside look at the events that shape how top leaders develop. Surprisingly, there is almost no available research that asks senior leaders to reflect on the experiences that helped them build their leadership ability. That is the purpose of this project. It will uncover the events that leaders believe were most critical to their personal progress from professional, to developing leader, to senior leader. It will provide useful insights to anyone interested in how leadership develops in the real world of large organizations.

The research is a key part of a Doctoral Program in Leadership Development and Executive Coaching being completed by Ric Durrant through Middlesex University and the Professional Development Foundation. Both are located in London, UK.

The Participants

There will be approximately 12 people in the study. All will hold senior leadership positions in large organizations, or will have recently left such a position (e.g. for retirement). All will have been a professional (engineer, lawyer, nurse, etc.), who moved into leadership, and ultimately became a senior leader. The research design calls for a relatively small number of participants because the point is to go deeply into the experience of leaders, rather than to ask the more superficial questions that can be answered by large numbers of people in surveys and questionnaires.

Confidentiality

No one will know about your participation in this study unless you choose to tell them. Names of individuals and organizations will not be used in reporting, and reported examples will not include details that allow specific participants to be identified. If you chose to tell others about your participation, please do not do so until after you have completed the interviews and reviewed the summaries of your input.

Preparing for the First Interview

The idea is to recall events in your career and community experience (volunteering, politics, etc.) that you think played a key role in helping you develop as a leader. You will only need 2 or 3 to discuss in the first conversation with Ric, and they can be any type of experience you choose. Consider such things as a specific job or project; a supportive or challenging relationship; a great opportunity or something difficult; a time when you thrived or a time that you struggled. It could have been a single conversation or a period of years. It may have been related to formal learning (a course or training program), or something that “just happened”. You decide. **The key requirement is that you believe the event provided important learning that made you a better leader.**

Here are a couple of suggestions. Think back over the phases of your career, and what you learned about leadership at different stages. You may want to glance through your resume to remind you of different events. And, when you think of a significant event, make a note of it. Memories will pop into your head in the days before your first meeting with Ric, and you don’t want to lose them.

Questions

If you have questions, or anything else to discuss with Ric, please contact him at –

(403) 240-4438 Office

(403) 614-5092 Cell

ric@leadershipcoach.ca

Appendix III

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Interview #1

Opening

- Briefly review purpose of study and commitment to confidentiality.
- Encourage participant to use their own judgment in choosing what to discuss. Indicate that they will not be asked to comments on any set topics or the input of other participants.
- Ask participant to provide a brief overview of their career touching on the jobs they have held, significant promotions, moves to new organisations, etc. Probe to ensure a clear understanding of the basic steps in their career path.

Body of Interview

- Ask participant to discuss the things they have learned about leadership that they believe have helped them be successful as a leader and as a senior executive. Suggest that they can do this by going through their careers chronologically, or by simply discussing topics as they come to mind. The aim is for them to proceed in a way that is comfortable for them.
- Encourage participant to elaborate with examples and stories from their career.
- When the participant focuses on something they have learned, probe for specifics on what they believe they have learned (i.e. details of the insight or skill gained), and probe for specifics on the events and experiences that led to this learning (time frame, circumstances, what was occurring, who was involved, etc.).
- When the participant focuses on a time or situation that they believe promoted learning, probe for specifics on what was happening to encourage learning, and probe for specifics on what was learned.

Interview #2

- Ask participant to continue discussing areas of leadership learning that they have found to be important. Ask them to include any insights and skills that occurred to them since the first interview.
- Continue probing for details of what was learned and how it was learned.
- By the end of interview #2, ensure that participant has covered all major phases of their career, and addressed both insight/understandings and concrete skills.

Interview #3

- Begin by indicating that you will be going through a summary of the insights and skills discussed in the first two interviews. Ask the participant to listen carefully to the summary of each area of learning, and either a) confirm that it has been understood correctly, or b) correct any misunderstanding. Also, ask them to add any additional details or examples they think will add clarity.
- Go through all the points in the participant's summary seeking verification or correction. If there is any uncertainty about an area of learning, probe to ensure that what was learned and how it was learned is clear.
- After reviewing the written summary, give the participant the opportunity to discuss any additional important areas of learning that have come to mind since the last interview or during this interview.
- Before concluding, review the process from here forward. Ask the participant to review the written summary they will receive, and point out anything that is not an accurate reflection of what they intended to say.
- Wrap-up with thanks, a reminder of the confidentiality standards, and a promise to provide a summary of the results.

Appendix IV

Shared Areas of Insight: Thematic Chart

Thematic Chart

The chart that begins on the following page demonstrates how participants contributed the key ideas (sub-themes) that made up the 18 topics (central themes) that were the most common areas of insight and understanding discussed by participants. The numbers in brackets, e.g. (1,3,4,6,9,11,12) identify the specific participants who made comments that were substantially in agreement with each sub-theme (see numbers and names of participants below). This shows how the thematic analysis of the data identified participant perspectives that came together in the central themes.

Participants are numbered as follows.

1	Marshall	7	Bev
2	Michael	8	Lorraine
3	Justin	9	Catherine
4	David	10	Michelle
5	Craig	11	Valerie
6	Len	12	Adele

Theme Number	Central Theme	Sub-theme (#'s represent participants*)	Sub-theme (#'s represent participants*)	Sub-theme (#'s represent participants*)
1	Showing interest in people, respecting their contributions, and treating them well, brings out the best in people, and greatly benefits your organisation. Leaders who try to dominate and control are badly misguided.	Showing interest in people, respecting their contributions, and treating them well brings out the best in people, and greatly benefits your organisation. (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12)	Leaders who try to dominate and control are badly misguided. (1,2,3,4,5,7,9,11)	
2	Strong leaders are rooted in their values and are respected for standing on principles. This is their reference point during challenging times. Without it they are pushed and pulled by the opinions and pressures around them.	Strong leaders are rooted in their values. This is their reference point during challenging times. Without it they are pushed and pulled by the opinions and pressures around them. (1,3,4,5,6,7,8,10,12)	Strong leaders are respected for standing on principle. (1,3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12)	
3	Senior leaders need to avoid the trap of becoming arrogant and egotistical. They are there to serve and better the organisation.	Senior leaders need to avoid the trap of becoming arrogant and egotistical. (1,2,4,6,7,9,10,11,12)	A good leader is <i>there to serve and better</i> the organisation. (1,2,3,5,6,7,8,10,12)	
4	A leader's success is determined by his/her team. Smart leaders focus on building and facilitating great teams.	A leader's success is determined by his/her team. (1,2,3,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12)	Smart leaders focus on building and facilitating great teams. (1,2,3,4,6,7,8,10,12)	

#	Central Theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme
5	Good leaders bring value by finding the solutions and strategies their organisation needs. They are often good problem solvers as individuals, but they learn to build teams and organisations that support and encourage innovative solutions.	Good leaders bring value by finding the solutions and strategies their organisation needs. (1,2,3,4,5,7,9,10, 11,12)	They are often good problem solvers as individuals. (1,2,3,4,5,7,9,10, 12)	They learn to build teams and organisations that support and encourage innovative solutions. (1,3,4,7,10,11)
6	Skilled leaders aggressively pursue learning, and extend the knowledge that is available to them by tapping into expertise inside and outside their organisations. They build networks of people who have diverse perspectives and areas of knowledge they do not have.	Skilled leaders aggressively pursue learning, and extend the knowledge that is available to them by tapping into expertise inside and outside their organisations. (1,2,5,6,7,8,9,10, 11,12)	They build networks of people who have diverse perspectives and areas of knowledge they do not have. (1,2,5,7,8,9,11, 12)	
7	Leaders are better prepared for the wide ranging discussion and decision making that happens at the executive level if they have a broad base of experience related to the organisation and its operating context.	Central Theme as in previous column (1,2,3,5,6,7,8,9,10, 12)		

#	Central Theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme
8	A critical function of the leader is focusing people on the challenges and tasks that really matter to the organisation's performance and future. It can be what matters in a specific project, or problem or business deal, or it can be what matters to the whole future of the enterprise.	A critical function of the leader is focusing people on the challenges and tasks that really matter to the organisation's performance and future. (1,2,4,5,7,8,9,10)	It can be what matters in a specific project, or problem or business deal. (1,2,4,5,7,9)	It can be what matters to the whole future of the enterprise. (1,2,5,8,9,10)
9	Leaders model high standards in personal work and have high expectations of others.	Leaders should model high standards in personal work. (1,2,3,4,6,7,10,11)	Leaders should expect high quality work from others. (1,2,3,4,7,10,11)	
10	Skilled leaders seek to understand other people's needs, motivations and priorities.	Central Theme as in previous column (1,2,3,5,6,9,10,12)		
11	Most of a leader's ability to get things done comes through their influence, the degree to which they are respected, and the processes they use to engage others, not through position power.	Most of a leader's ability to get things done comes through their influence, the degree to which they are respected, and the processes they use to engage others. (1,2,4,5,9,10,11,12)	The use of position power is secondary. (1,2,4,5,9,10,11,12)	
12	People thrive in jobs that are a good fit for their skills, and where their values and passions align with those of their leaders.	People thrive in jobs that are a good fit for their skills. (2,5,8,9,12)	People thrive in jobs where their values and passions align with those of their leaders. (1,2,5,6,8,9,12)	

#	Central Theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme
13	It is important for leaders to show their human side. Employees want to know something about the person, and to see that this person cares about things they care about. Letting people see how you think helps them align with you, and support you.	It is important for leaders to show their human side. Employees want to know something about the person, and to see that this person cares about things they care about. (1,2,5,8,9,11,12)	Letting people see how you think helps them align with you, and support you. (1,2,8,9,11,12)	
14	Encouraging challenging and provocative discussion brings out the best ideas and best solutions.	Central Theme as in previous column (1,2,6,8,9,11,12)		
15	As you move up in an organisation, it is important to become comfortable working with senior leaders who have aggressive or challenging styles.	Central Theme as in previous column (1,3,6,7,8,9,10)		
16	There is sometimes serious emotional hardship associated with leadership that can be compounded by personal or family problems.	There is sometimes serious emotional hardship associated with leadership. (1,3,5,6,7,8,9)	A leader's hardship can be compounded by personal or family problems. (1,3,6,7,8,9)	
17	Organisational change is a primary challenge for leaders. It is difficult and complex, and often harder than anticipated.	Organisational change is a primary challenge for leaders. (2,4,5,7,10,11,12)	It is difficult and complex, and often harder than anticipated. (2,4,5,7,10,11,12)	

#	Central Theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme
18	It is vital to be trusted by those above you, and to have the trust of those who work for you. When you lose trust, it is very hard to regain.	It is vital to be trusted by those above you. (1,3,4,6,9,11)	It is vital to have the trust of those who work for you. (1,3,4,11,12)	When you lose trust, it is very hard to regain. (3,4,6,9,12)

Appendix V

Sample of the Written Summary of Areas of Learning Provided to Participants

Background

This appendix includes a sample of the written summary of personal areas of learning that was provided to each participant for validation and future use. It is a concise document designed for quick review by a busy executive, and consequently has limitations as discussed in the body of the report.

These documents were prepared for each participant for two main reasons. First of all, these summaries gave participants something in return for the time they committed to the study. After giving three hours of their time to talk about what they had learned about leadership, the summary of their personal input served as a record of the ideas, beliefs and skills that had become their foundation as a leader. They could reflect on the summary and use it in any way they chose. Participants commented that it was a rare opportunity to have this information captured and recorded for them. And secondly, this summary allowed participants to review the areas of learning that they had discussed, and confirm that the researcher had understood the essential ideas correctly.

(Participant's Name) Leadership Foundation

Prepared by Ric Durrant
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May 11, 2011

Introduction

This is a summary of the key insights, perspectives and skills that form the foundation of your leadership. These points were identified through your personal reflections, and captured during a research project exploring the leadership related learning that takes place as professionals gradually progress to executive roles. I have tried to capture them in a concise form that will be easy to refer to in the future.

The goal was to conduct the research in a way that would bring value to each participant, as they shared their time and wisdom to deepen the understanding of the leadership learning needed to succeed at the executive level. Many of you commented on how useful it was to have this rare opportunity to pause and think through your approach to leadership in such detail.

This summary may anchor your thinking as you consider principles to apply to future leadership challenges. It should also be a good resource when you want to share your thoughts on leadership as a volunteer, mentor or speaker. And finally, it should be interesting to check back in a few years and see how your views on leadership have continued to evolve.

Thank you for your great contribution.

Key Insights and Perspectives on Leadership

1. **Take initiative as a problem solver.** Solving technical and business problems allows you to bring value that others recognize, and it gradually builds the confidence needed to find solutions for larger, executive level challenges. Key elements include: seeing how to define the problem, taking initiative (often without being asked), being sensitive to the people involved, and being able to engage those people so that they support the solution.
2. **Solve the systemic problem.** A lot of people respond to problems by treating the symptoms. If you don't solve the systemic problem, the problem will keep reoccurring.

3. **Support and encourage initiative and "having a voice".** Build an environment where people feel safe questioning the status quo, and putting their ideas on the table. Cultivate improvement and game changing new solutions. Don't stifle innovation by cost cutting and punishing people for making mistakes.
4. **Encourage provocative questions and discussions in your team and throughout the organization.** Exposure to people with different backgrounds and perspectives is critical to the process of finding good solutions.
5. **Most of the time people with the same information will come to the same conclusion, and the leader will not have to use their authority.** If you make sure that everyone involved has full and complete information and a chance to discuss it, the group will tend toward an agreed upon decision. This reduces the number of times the leader has to make a call that others may disagree with. A key strategy is to draw the naysayers into the in-depth analysis.
6. **Progressive challenges build confidence.** A leader's career benefits from projects, relationships, circumstances that are difficult at the time they are experienced. Rising to the occasion to successfully deal with such challenges builds confidence and resilience, and stretches the scope of what you can handle. Challenge open the door to learning and growth.
7. **Demonstrate quality in what you do, and whenever quality is important, expect it from others.** If someone doesn't deliver needed quality on small things, it suggests that may not be trustworthy when it comes to delivering quality on larger projects where it really counts.
8. **Seek other people's insights.** Everyone who works for you knows more about something than you do. Having a strong network of relationships with people who are capable in many areas is a huge resource. This includes people in your immediate team, elsewhere in the organization, and outside of the organization. The key is to be open to the idea that you can make better decisions with input from people whose experience and knowledge goes beyond your own. Seek out relationships with insightful people throughout your organization, and through outside volunteer roles, committees, etc.
9. **Get the big principles right. Focus on what really matters.** It is easy to gather large amounts of information, and crunch the numbers in many ways with the aim of finding the right answer to a business decision. Often, however, the key is to find the underlying principles that will make the strategy, deal or decision either good or bad. It is a matter of finding what really matters, and not being distracted by the endless details or protracted attempts to make the analysis precise.
10. **Be respected for your principles.** Demonstrate a strong and positive set of values and character traits. Earn respect by showing that your business and people related principles deserve respect. It can mean standing up to more senior people,

or taking a difficult stance on an important issue.

11. **Business benefits by proactively addressing community relationships and impacts.** It should be seen as an important investment that produces operating advantages, not philanthropy or an expense.
12. **People will work hard in a positive environment.** You don't have to "walk all over them". They will "walk on hot coals" for you, if they respect you and understand the value of your direction. Become an employer of choice, and get great talent that wants to make a contribution.
13. **Develop a broad understanding of the business.** Stepping out of technical roles such as engineering, and moving into positions that provide exposure to many different aspects of the business, helps prepare people for the wide ranging business discussions that occur at the executive level. A senior leader needs to be able to contribute to discussions concerning finance, business strategy, personnel, mergers and acquisitions, corporate responsibility, etc.
14. **Show interest in people and they will support you.** People at all level of your organization, and in outside industry groups, volunteer organizations etc., are motivated to support senior leaders who take the time to interact with them and treat them with respect. Show everyone from board members to cafeteria workers that you care about them and their concerns.
15. **Your team will determine if you succeed.** Your job is to help them succeed by building trust and collegiality, giving them hope and shared goals and values, and encouraging them to solve problems and figure out "how to get there". Support and encourage their initiative.
16. **Work for organizations where you feel aligned with the values and the key people.** Without this alignment you will either leave or experience great stress.
17. **Align your job selection with your strongest skills.** Then, surround yourself with people who are strong where you are weak.
18. **Learn to work "eye to eye" with senior leaders** (e.g. CEO's, political leaders) without being intimidated. Being respectful, but not subservient, will earn their respect.
19. **When hiring senior leaders, recognize that one key leader can have a serious negative impact.** It is vital to understand a new leader's values, motivations and skills for working with people.

20. **Leadership can involve some very challenging and stressful times that push you, your values and your judgment to the limits.** If you handle them well, you come away with greater confidence as a leader.
21. **The hours don't make you look good. The outcomes make you look good.** You do not get ahead in organizations by putting in more hours than other people. You get ahead because you create valuable outcomes and solutions.
22. **You have to lead by example.** You have to demonstrate the behavior you want in others, and set standards through your own actions. You can't ask others to meet one standard and then treat yourself as privileged. You have to walk the talk, and demonstrate what you mean by the choices you make in the behaviors you exhibit.
23. **Trust is critical in an effective organization.** People have to know that they are going to be supported if they did something for the right reasons. If you don't have trust, you don't have loyalty, and you don't have innovation.
24. **Organizations need to be careful that their reward systems are not rewarding greed and ego.**
25. **You can take a lot of pressure off yourself if you realize that there are a lot of people out there who can help you. Leaders do not have to solve the problems of the business themselves.** Focus people on clear objectives and key problems, and align them in finding solutions.
26. **It is not the leader's organization.** They are there to do a job, and take care of the organization.

Concrete Leadership Skills that Make You a Better Leader

1. Defining and solving problems.
2. Seeing the big picture, what really matters, and why things may work or not work.
3. Ability to listen and ask good questions that reveal issues and potential challenges.
4. Ability to connect with people from the board to the mailroom, and make them feel comfortable. Good interpersonal communication.
5. Curiosity about technology, and an interest in staying current enough to understand its potential value or problems.
6. Understanding of finances and transactions. Knowing enough to ask good questions and see potential problems.
7. Speaking and presentation skills.